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Teaching without a Roadmap: A Mixed Methods Study of New Teachers' Experience with a Missing Curriculum

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TEACHING WITHOUT A ROADMAP: A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF NEW
TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE WITH A MISSING CURRICULUM

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Western Michigan University, 2023

As new teachers enter the field of education, they face many challenges as they work to quickly adapt to the many demands of the job. One of the most pressing factors for new teachers is deciding *what to actually teach* each day. For educators, the curriculum represents the master plan that both guides their educational efforts and supplies the tools to get the job done. However, new teachers experience varying levels of curriculum support when they begin their careers, and some receive absolutely no support at all. This study describes those cases of beginning a teaching career with little to no curriculum support as the *missing curriculum phenomenon*. Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this study sought to better understand both the frequency and the impact of the missing curriculum phenomenon for new teachers.

Beginning with a quantitative phase, a survey was administered to all identifiable secondary educators teaching English, Math, Science, or Social Studies in a particular county in a Midwestern state. Findings from the survey suggest that new teachers often lack important curriculum supports and that large gaps in curriculum infrastructure exist. Of the 134 teachers who responded and met the inclusion criteria, over 70% reported significant gaps in the curriculum support they received in their first year of professional teaching, and over 20% reported receiving no curriculum resources or support at all. In order to overcome the challenges associated with missing curriculum resources, the majority of teachers reported dedicating over 10 hours per week outside of work toward curriculum development, and most new teachers also find themselves spending their own money on curriculum resources. Despite these challenges, it

is also important to note that teachers reported that their access to curriculum materials significantly improved over the course of their careers.

In the qualitative research phase that followed, five teachers who had experienced a missing curriculum were identified for follow-up interviews. Their testimony revealed significant levels of job-related stress related to their missing curriculum experience, accompanied by strong feelings of doubt, fear, and isolation. Their descriptions also provided insight into the conditions that foster missing curriculum experiences, including high levels of turnover, the absence of consistent leadership, the failure to maintain resources, and the failure to provide required supports for new teachers.

The study's findings bridge two important areas of educational research: (1) new teacher retention and (2) curriculum use. While much research has positioned the use of mentors and new teacher induction as the preeminent retention strategies, the findings of this study promote the curriculum itself as an important support method. This study's findings also affirm a small but growing body of literature that calls for greater attention to be paid to what curriculum is (or is not) in use by public schools in order to better support the teachers who are charged to implement the curriculum in their classrooms.

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by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

New teachers face many challenges as they begin their instructional careers, and they often experience varied levels of professional support. One of the biggest and most time-consuming challenges new teachers face is choosing what instructional materials to use as they create their daily lesson plans. While new teachers' experiences are certainly varied, some report receiving *no* formal curriculum materials from their district in their first year of teaching, describing instead a general lack of district-provided instructional materials *and* the absence of guidelines or expectations around *what to teach*. This study aims to capture the experiences of new teachers who have taught in a *missing curriculum* environment.

As a two-stage, mixed methods research design, this study combines an initial survey with in-depth interviews to better understand the experiences of high school teachers who begin their careers with no curriculum support. Through systematic analysis of participant responses, I describe the missing curriculum experience first in terms of the context and frequency with which it is encountered. Then, through follow-up interviews with selected survey respondents, I follow in the traditions of IPA phenomenology, aiming to describe the missing curriculum in the words of five participants who have experienced it, detailing the perceived effect on their professional practice. Findings are presented chronologically as a thematic narrative, and the paper concludes with recommendations for teachers, the colleges of education who train them, the districts who employ them, and the policy makers who govern them.

Background

When I began my career in education 10 years ago, I was so excited when I landed my first teaching job in a large urban district in my home city. It was finally time for me to begin making a positive impact on high school students through the discipline of English Language

Arts. As a mid-year hire, I was charged with taking over two sections of ELA 9, two sections of ELA 10, and one section of creative writing. As my start date approached, I eagerly awaited the opportunity to meet the teaching team I would be working with and to examine the district's materials for these courses. However, these experiences never came.

When my first day finally arrived, I was directed to report to the teacher's lounge at 8:00 AM. Here, I was met by the building principal, who informed me I would not be entering the classroom quite yet; rather, I was to continue to report to the teacher's lounge for another week and a half, and my directive was to 'begin planning' for my classes. I was given a grade-level textbook for ELA 9 and 10 as well as a copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which was intended to be part of the 10th grade experience. Nothing existed yet for the creative writing course, and students had been supervised intermittently by several substitute teachers since the semester start in early January. And so, there I sat, alone, for 10 instructional days trying to wrap my head around the massive task of curriculum building for three classes, wondering what exactly I was expected to do when I eventually met my own students for the very first time in my teaching career.

While I certainly worked hard to serve my students to the best of my ability, I have always felt that my effectiveness in that first year was stunted. The academic resources that give teachers guidance on *what* to do and *when* to do it were simply *missing*. Unfortunately, my experience is not an uncommon one in the field of teaching. This study focuses on the lived experiences of new teachers who began their teaching careers in such an environment, receiving little or no curriculum support in their first year as an educator, teaching with what this study refers to as the *missing curriculum*.

While there are many definitions of 'curriculum' in the literature, this study focuses on the *operational* curriculum (Lalor, 2017). Lalor (2017) defines the operational curriculum as

those resources that explain *how* standards will be achieved with students (p. 4). The operational curriculum includes texts, assessments, instructional resources, content, and planning documents that aid teachers in daily instruction (p. 4). In other words, the operational curriculum provides teachers with a road map for the school year. Therefore, the missing curriculum phenomenon occurs when teachers enter the field of teaching without access to these important instructional resources, either because they do not exist, they are not able to be located, or they have no utility without appropriate training.

Problem Statement

Description of the Research Problem

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the height of the standards-based curriculum reform movement with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a federal act focused on bringing consistency to the world of education. While fraught with overwhelming accountability challenges for schools and eventually replaced by the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), the era held important implications for curriculum theory and beliefs about how curricula should be implemented. The goal of the standards movement was to bring common performance expectations to schools across America, characterizing the status quo of the country's classrooms as instructional "chaos" (Schmoker & Marzano, 1999, p. 19). Seminal educational researchers like Schmoker and Marzano (1999) acknowledged that it was common practice at the time for teachers to make individual instructional decisions independent of any curriculum guides, causing wide variability classroom to classroom. In order to hone a more systematic approach, Schmoker and Marzano encouraged academics to imagine a world "where teachers know exactly what essential skills and knowledge students should learn that year and where they know that their colleagues are teaching to the same manageable standards" (p. 19).

Since that time, there have been movements to standardize the curriculum experience in schools, like the Common Core State Standards Initiative. However, teachers' experiences with curriculum remains quite varied. Some new teachers are handed scripted curriculum packages during the onboarding process that they must follow without deviation (Au, 2007). Others receive a range of district-provided materials that vary in terms of depth and utility, sometimes inaccurately defining framework materials (like the state standards) as the district curricula (Kauffman et al., 2002). Of particular importance, many teachers find work in a setting that does not have any formal curriculum foundation (Kauffman et al., 2002). In these environments, instructional materials like scope and sequence documents, aligned assessments, lesson plans, or even basic resources to support student activities simply do not exist.

These observations are particularly troubling considering that the enacted curriculum, what is *actually* taught in the classroom, is the primary vehicle through which teachers impact student learning (Taylor, 2013). Broadly, a teacher's curriculum represents a range of educational concepts, including materials, lesson plans, instructional strategies and interventions, scope and sequence, state standards, local learning objectives, and so on (Kauffman, 2005, p. 2). However, existing research demonstrates educators have struggled to develop a consistent understanding of what constitutes quality curriculum and that large variability and misalignment exists between state-level standards documents, district-level written curriculum, and classroom-level enacted curriculum (Brown & Edelson, 2003; Kauffman et al., 2002; Kulo & Cates, 2013). In the context of the missing curriculum classroom, there is little chance that teachers' methods and the instructional tasks performed by students will yield optimal outcomes within the limited learning time available.

The challenge of beginning a teaching career with missing curriculum materials is magnified by the reality that many teachers do not receive the necessary training to develop

curriculum entirely on their own. Taylor (2016) documents a concern that most professional development opportunities for teachers pertaining to curriculum "focus on either how to most effectively use an existing textbook as written or on improving planning and teaching in general" (p. 446). Likewise, Handler (2010) found that most universities are likely not adequately preparing new teachers to understand theories and methods of curriculum design. Males et al. (2015) document a similar need to more actively prepare teachers for interacting with curriculum materials and suggest that new teachers may benefit from specific development around how to more proficiently use curriculum materials. The need for additional training and support is clearly documented when looking at the work of new teachers specifically. Carl (2014) found that, even when working with scripted curriculum programs, new teachers needed support in interpreting the resources given to them.

In the modern context, the importance of curriculum cannot be understated. In the pursuit of standardized performance expectations, intentional planned pathways must be present to lead teachers, and ultimately students, toward those goals. Most importantly, the work advocated by the standards reform movement is not isolated to individual classrooms; rather, it is suggested to be implemented across the educational landscape, impacting each classroom within a school district.

Literature Deficiency

While there have been many case studies exploring how individual teachers or teacher teams interact with specific curriculum materials at various levels (e.g., Gunckel & Moore, 2005; Kulo & Cates, 2013; Taylor, 2013), there is limited scholarly documentation of the narrative of missing curriculum experiences. Much of the existing literature on curriculum enactment takes the approach of studying curriculum that is *already* in place, analyzing teacher interaction with a particular curriculum model (e.g. Gunckel & Moore, 2005; Males et al., 2015); measuring impact

on student achievement, particularly in the fields of mathematics and English language arts (e.g. Reys et al., 2003; Aughinbaugh, 2012); or, more recently, examining curricula through a social justice and inclusivity lens (e.g. Burke & Greenfield, 2016; Gay, 2018). Readers need to dive deep into research about new teachers and their induction experiences to find mention of the challenges faced in the *absence* of curriculum (e.g., Fry, 2010; Margolis & Doring, 2016). When encountered, however, teachers in missing curriculum environments describe significant amounts of stress related to the constant demands of lesson planning alongside feelings of self-doubt as they navigate the unclear expectations fostered by the missing curriculum infrastructure. These teachers often report feeling unsupported, a sense of stunted professional development, and a worry for the potential negative impact on their students.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to connect the field of curriculum research with the study of new teachers' experiences by giving voice to teachers who began their teaching careers without curriculum materials or support. By sharing common themes in their experiences, I hope to provide additional rationale for comprehensive induction procedures for new teachers as well as insight into the specific training and material needs that new teachers experience in relation to curriculum. This study may be helpful for district leaders who curate district curricula or those who supervise new teacher induction programs as it raises specific concerns about these school systems from the very teachers they are intended to support. This study may also be helpful for higher education and the institutions that prepare teachers to enter the workforce. Additionally, there may also be relevance for policy-makers and legislators who govern the curricular expectations for public schools.

Purpose Statement

Using a two-stage mixed methods research design, I use both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a well-rounded description of the missing curriculum experience. By identifying common themes in that lived experience, I hope to expand current understanding of the phenomenon of missing curriculum and its impact on the instructional practice of new teachers. First, through a survey of high school teachers, I explore both the frequency and context of teachers' experience with any missing curriculum. The primary rationale for incorporating a quantitative component into this study was to document the extent of the missing curriculum phenomenon in the field today. Then, following a phenomenological approach to the qualitative phase of this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with teachers who share the lived experience of beginning their teaching careers without the support of an established curriculum. This approach was important to characterize the impact of a missing curriculum as a narrative, created in participants' own terms, based on their own lived experience.

Research Questions

The overarching research questions that guided my study focused on ascertaining the frequency of teachers experiencing a missing curriculum, and then for a subset of teachers, what was their lived experience of beginning their teaching career with a missing curriculum? My specific research questions are

1. To what extent do teachers experience a missing curriculum in their first year of teaching?

2. What are the specific challenges that teachers ascribe to the experience of teaching without curriculum support?

3. What structural shortfalls in the onboarding process, if any, contributed to the missing curriculum experience?

4. How do teachers explain the impact of the missing curriculum experience on their

pedagogical development and, ultimately, student learning?

Conceptual Framework and Narrative

According to Maxwell (2013), a conceptual framework is a graphical depiction of "the

system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs

your research" (p. 39). Similarly, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) describe conceptual frameworks as

a map of the "key factors or constructs to be studied," an explanation of relationships to existing

theory, and "an argument for the study's importance" (p. 7). For this study, I have embraced the

idea of using the terms *conceptual framework* and *theoretical framework* interchangeably, and I

use Figure 1 to diagram the relationships between (1) the subject being studied, (2) the

characteristics of the phenomenon they experienced, (3) their perceptions about their lived

experience, and (4) the theoretical backdrop of broader curriculum research and historical

context.

The conceptual frame for my study places new teachers' experience with a missing

curriculum at the center, as this topic is the focal point of my research. The character graphics

represent the population for this study: teachers reflecting back on their initial onboarding

experience and the curriculum supports they may or may not have received. As a two-part study,

data regarding such reflection backwards was collected within each of two phases of my study:

first, with the broad focus of a general survey about what type of curriculum infrastructure

teachers encountered in their first year, and second, with a narrower lens aimed at interviewing

those teachers who reported they received the *least* curriculum support. This narrower lens

sought to explore teachers' perceptions of the experience that this study describes as *the* missing

curriculum.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Missing Curriculum
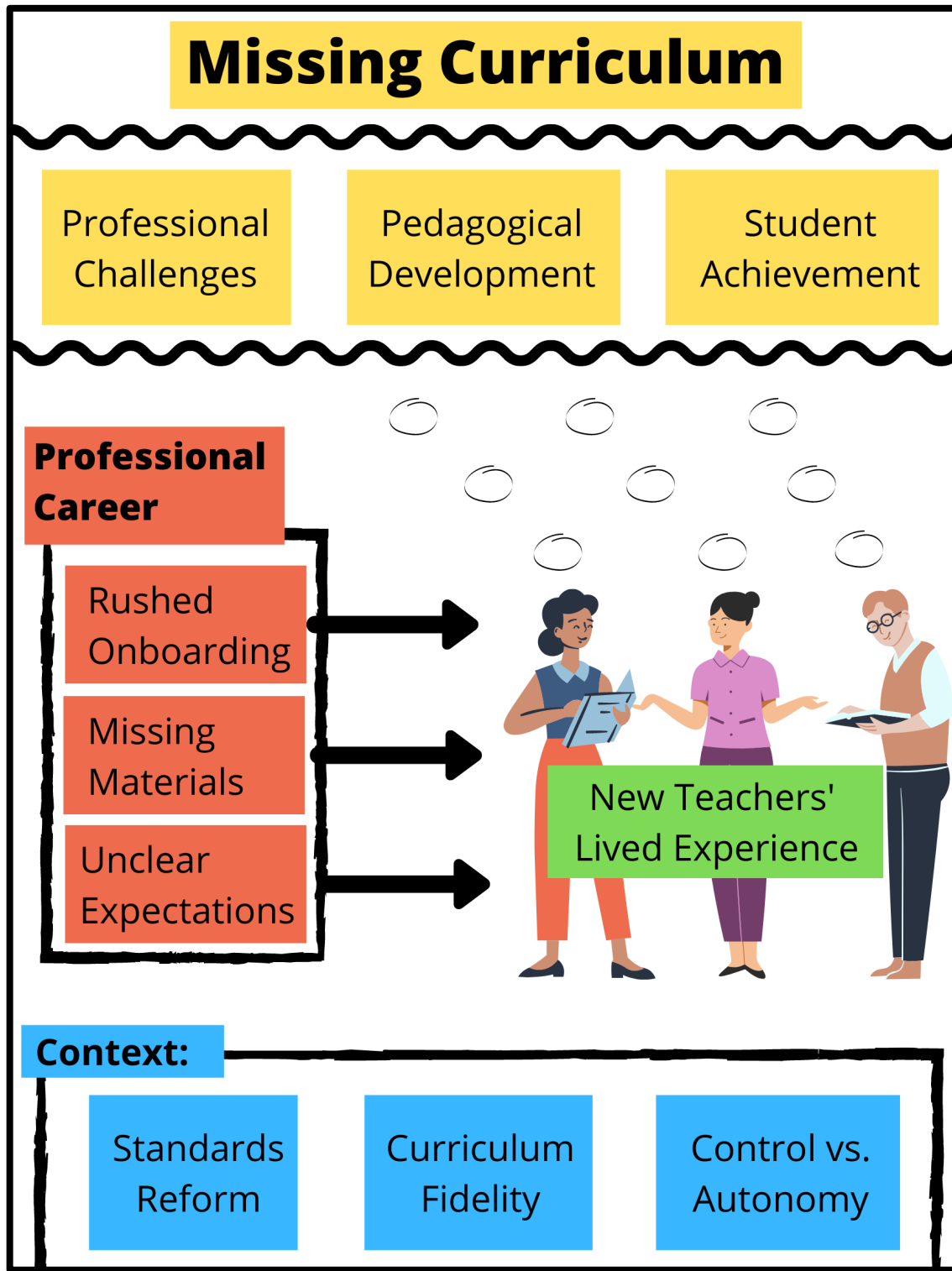
The red boxes on the left with arrows moving toward the teachers depict the start of a professional education career that some new teachers may experience. Within the outlined "Professional Career" frame are the major characteristics that define the professional context of a missing curriculum experience. For this study, the definition of the missing curriculum has been pieced together from descriptions of new teachers' curricular challenges already in the literature. Based on the literature review, three overarching criteria were selected to comprise the professional context of a missing curriculum phenomenon: (1) a rushed onboarding experience (Johnson et al., 2004; Liu & Johnson, 2006); (2) missing physical materials (Kauffman et al., 2002; McCann & Johannessen, 2004; Fry, 2010; Kaufman et al., 2018); and (3) unclear expectations from administrators about *what* to teach (Johnson et al., 2004; Smeaton & Waters, 2013).

When teachers experience support gaps in these areas, they often are discovered within the context of research on new teacher induction (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Johnson et al., 2004). In these cases, new teachers often couple their experience with their internal sense of teacher quality, describing feelings of frustration, ambiguity, and ineffectiveness. My goal with this research is to focus specifically on the *curricular* component of the induction process, aiming to learn what impacts teachers ascribe to their missing curriculum experience.

Following the thought bubbles up from the teachers' character graphics, the yellow section is intended to represent teachers' perceptions of (1) how a missing curriculum contributed to professional challenges, (2) how it affected their pedagogical development, and (3) how it impacted student achievement in their classrooms. As a two-part, mixed-methods study, I will have the opportunity to study these perceptions in two distinct ways. First, I study the scope of the missing curriculum phenomenon, learning about the extent to which it occurs

within the population studied, and, second, I characterize the phenomenon in the participants' own language through targeted interviews.

The bottom blue frame labeled "Context" represents the theoretical concepts from broader curriculum research that this study 'stands' upon. Nationally, voices in the United States have been calling for a standards-based curriculum for nearly 20 years, and pressure has mounted on states to make large scale curriculum adoptions (Schmoker & Marzano, 1999). While growing bodies of research call for the use of high-fidelity, impact-tested curriculum materials (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Kulo & Cates, 2013; Lalor, 2017; Whitehurst, 2009), the political pendulum seems to be swinging in reverse, with movements to decentralize curriculum decision-making (Gewertz, 2015). At the local level, a similar debate exists around the amount of autonomy teachers *should* have over their curriculum (Au, 2007; Handler, 2010), with some new teachers even pushing back *against* scripted materials intended to support them (Carl, 2014). Each of these contextual arguments influence the amount, type, and quality of curriculum materials teachers are likely to encounter in the field *as well as* the attitudes towards curriculum materials they bring with them. In some cases, the change *between* different curriculum paradigms may in fact be the reason for a district's lapse in curriculum infrastructure.

Methods Overview

This study is focused on describing the lived experience of teachers who begin their careers in a missing curriculum context at the secondary level. In order to identify participants who have worked in a missing curriculum environment, electronic surveys were distributed to all teachers in a particular county in one Midwestern state who work for a public (charter or traditional) school and who teach one of the four core subject areas (Math, English, Social Studies, or Science). This survey was designed to screen for qualified participants, gather

demographic data about teachers who have worked in a *missing curriculum* context, and retrieve perception data about that experience.

After the completion of the survey, five participants were identified for in-depth follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews used an interview schedule designed to describe each participant's unique experience in relation to the four research sub-questions. Participant responses were systematically analyzed and thematically coded in order to provide a narrative description of the missing curriculum phenomenon from the participants' perspective as well as to capture their insights about potential curriculum supports for new teachers entering the field.

Chapter 1 Closure

The physical resources that comprise a school's curriculum function as the road map for teachers to follow as they lead their students toward the content goals of their respective subject areas. In the case of new teachers, who lack the professional expertise to draw on their own experiences to inform their course planning, teaching without a roadmap can have serious implications for both the teacher and the student. While this study focuses on teachers' experiences without curriculum resources, it is important to also understand that the field of curriculum research is not unified in what constitutes 'good' curriculum or even in how to *define* 'curriculum' for practitioners; arguably, this disunity alongside a continual debate around *who* owns the curriculum has contributed to the current status of curriculum resources (or lack thereof) in American schools. This American history of the curriculum debate (including the evolution of the missing curriculum), the known impacts of curriculum on students and teachers, and the existing evidence of a missing curriculum will be explored further in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum research is a diverse and complex field in the context of American public schools, where educational theory, national politics, school funding, and teachers' training and experience all intersect to influence classroom instructional practices. In every state across the nation, legislatures have adopted a curriculum framework and/or a set of standards, delineating a learning path for each student within their jurisdiction. Pre-service teachers enrolled in colleges of education learn the names of iconic curriculum theorists like Dewey, Freire, or Hirsh. But what does the work look like at the ground level? How is curriculum enacted in classrooms in our public schools each and every day?

In many cases, the curriculum is an *assumed* component of a local school's infrastructure. In a field where the concept of curriculum can be taken for granted, existing research has ironically struggled to create a universal definition or develop clear recommendations for schools for this foundational piece of our education system. Researchers who have warned about the status of the curriculum in American schools have commented on the limited amount of true research studies evaluating curriculum impact and the limited available data sets documenting what curricula schools use. Indeed, the work of defining the curriculum is broad in scope and challenging; yet, without clear definition and careful attention, there is opportunity for schools to lose focus on the actual curriculum materials they intend to maintain. In these cases, rather than maintaining a well-defined written curriculum, schools (and the teachers who serve them) can find that they are actually working with a missing curriculum.

This literature review explores issues related to a missing curriculum and the experiences of new teachers who may encounter it in the field. The first section begins by reviewing curriculum research with a broad lens, exploring the historical evolution of curriculum theory,

existing definitions of curriculum, and the importance of maintaining a written curriculum. The research in this section helped me identify the components that are essential to a written curriculum, thereby identifying what criteria might be absent in a missing curriculum. In the second section, I examine research that attempts to define the *status* of the curriculum and curriculum research, sharing evidence of a missing curriculum. Lastly, I look at research connecting new teachers, induction, and a missing curriculum, identifying specific criteria from the literature that were ultimately used for sourcing the criteria I used to define the missing curriculum phenomenon for my study.

A Background on Curriculum Studies

What Is Curriculum?

The definition of *curriculum* and its intended purpose shift considerably with each particular educational theorist and the socio-political peculiarities of time period in which they operated. Theorists are *not* aligned in what the curriculum *is*, nor are they aligned in what the curriculum *should* be. In an effort to provide a more robust, well-rounded definition of curriculum, I will profile some of the canonical voices in modern curriculum theory and their contributions to our understanding of what constitutes curriculum.

In the early 1900s, seminal educational theorist John Dewey (1902) in his essay *The Child and the Curriculum* described two prevailing schools of thought regarding curriculum and instruction in his time period: "'Guidance and control' are the catchwords of one school; 'freedom and initiative' of the other" (p. 10). In Dewey's mind, schools either pursued a rote method of instruction, "procuring texts giving logical parts and sequences, and […] presenting these portions in class in a similar definite and graded way" or they could instead begin with the child, where "[the student's] present powers which are to assert themselves; his present capacities which are to be exercised; his present attitudes which are to be realized" (p. 31). From

these two schools of thought, very different visions of what a curriculum *might* be begin to form: one scripted and stagnant while the other is loosely defined and dynamic. In this way, Dewey gave recognition to two polar viewpoints in an ongoing debate in curriculum theory about who 'owns' the curriculum and how it should be defined – a debate which has had significant influence on the status of curriculum in American schools in modern times.

As America turned to an age of scientific advancement, mechanization of labor, and an economy of global competition, so too did curriculum theory evolve, swaying the needle toward a scripted, defined curriculum. Bobbitt (1918), an early modern educational philosopher, believed that schools had real opportunity to support the needs of a workforce rapidly trending towards specialization at the turn of the century. Bobbitt defined the curriculum in two ways: "(1) it is the entire range of experiences, both undirected and directed, concerned in unfolding the abilities of the individual; or (2) it is the series of consciously directed training experiences that the schools use for completing and affecting the unfoldment" (p. 43). However, in his treatise *The Curriculum,* Bobbitt worried that the latter definition was lacking and underdeveloped in practice, criticizing that "we have aimed at a vague culture, an ill-defined discipline, a nebulous harmonious development of the individual" and that "the controlling purposes of education have not been sufficiently particularized" in the educational machine (p. 41). From Bobbitt's perspective, "the scientific task preceding all others is the determination of the curriculum" (p. 42).

Some have taken this idea of itemizing the curriculum to almost extreme ends. In the 1980s, Hirsch (1987) unleashed a new wave of cultural fervor into curriculum discussions with his release of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. This text, in essence, attempted to list every concept, fact, or idea that Hirsch believed students should be familiar with by the time they graduated high school. Hirsch's purpose hinged on a belief that by focusing on a

common set of knowledge, or "Cultural Literacy," schools could promote a sense of national identity and community (p. 14). While his social commentary sparked much debate, Hirsch also recognized that great dissimilarity existed in the school experiences of students, writing that "the American school curriculum is fragmented both horizontally across subjects and vertically within subjects. For one student in grade nine, social studies may focus on family relations; for another, the focus may be on ancient history" (p. 116). Hirsch worried that "high school graduates do not reliably share much common information, even when they graduate from the same school" (p. 8).

To complicate matters further, some theorists have posited multiple different *types* of curricula embedded within the universal term, each with their own definition. Glatthorn (2001), for example, identifies six different curriculum types. In his words, (1) the "recommended curriculum" is that which is advocated for by experts while (2) the "written curriculum" is what is organized in district documentation and (3) the "taught curriculum" is what actually occurs in the classroom (p. 272). Publishers influence education with (4) the "supported curriculum," that which is embedded in software and textbooks, and state policy measures (5) the "tested curriculum" through standardized assessments (pp. 272-273). Each of these curriculum types aims at influencing (6) the "learned curriculum" – that which is actually acquired by students through the learning process and the collective educational experience (p. 273). Other theorists, like Freire (1970) have defined a "hidden curriculum" to describe the values of privileged social classes that are either overtly or latently embedded within the curriculum, especially the biases communicated through material selection when determining what to include (and what to omit) in the curriculum.

At a more practical level, McBrien and Brandt (1997) put forward a working definition for professionals in their guide for educational terms, stating simply that curriculum "usually

refers to a written plan that outlines what students will be taught […] For example, the English curriculum might include English literature, U.S. literature, world literature, essay styles, creative writing, business writing, Shakespeare, modern poetry, and the novel" (pp. 27-28). However, as a testament to the challenge of defining this term, McBrien and Brandt also concede that curriculum may instead "refer to all the courses offered at a given school, or all the courses offered at a school in a particular area of study" (p. 27).

Whitehurst (2009) provides a more practitioner-oriented definition of curriculum, describing it as "the content and sequence of the experiences that are intended to be delivered to students in formal coursework" (p. 1). The curriculum also includes "teaching materials such as those that can be found in commercial textbooks" as well as "the pedagogy for delivering those materials" (p. 1). While Whitehurst's definition aligns well with how the term is used colloquially in the field, the sheer scope of what is included in this definition can create difficulty in conceptualizing what curriculum actually looks like. The volume of items that comprise the content of a course, its pacing and organization, the physical and digital materials used, *and* the methods by which these elements are enacted is massive and challenging to quantify.

English (2010), while still wide-ranging in her explanation, provides a more finite, detailed definition of curriculum. In her words, "the content of schooling in all of its forms (written and unwritten) is called the *curriculum*" (p. 5). It is inclusive of "any document or plan that exists in a school or school system that defines the work of teachers, at least to the extent of identifying the content to be taught children and the possible methods to be used in the process" (p. 10). The specific articles that comprise the curriculum "may be textbooks, curriculum guides, scope and sequence charts, computer programs, accreditation guidelines, state department of education or state board guidelines, local board policies, or their specifications" (pp. 10-11). While this definition is just as broad in its scope as earlier definitions, including virtually any

document or instructional practice related to the learning path of students, it highlights the most common pieces of infrastructure that constitute the *curriculum* in most schools.

These overlapping and competing definitions of what the curriculum *is* underscore one of the major challenges of curriculum study: there is no widely accepted reference criteria to describe whether something *is* or *is not* curriculum. This sentiment is echoed in the literature from advocates like Steiner (2017), who writes that "because no 'taxonomy' exists of curricular features, research has not explored the elements of curriculum that really matter in student learning" (p. 2). The range of potential artifacts that may be part of a curriculum is significant and the variability in how they might be used in practice also fluctuates considerably. In its most general application, curriculum simply refers to the *stuff* of teaching; yet, for the purpose of this study, the necessary limitations on the term were derived from English, focusing specifically on the instructional and assessment materials of the course and the affiliated planning documentation.

Why Curriculum Matters

While there are competing ideas about what constitutes curriculum and what should be the focus of curriculum, there is much consensus around the *importance* of curriculum. Curriculum is widely recognized as the primary vehicle for student achievement, and thus there are a wide range of curriculum studies focusing on impact testing specific curriculum materials as well as investigations of the effect of implementation fidelity. To underscore the understood importance of curriculum, there are government programs directed at highlighting evidence-based curriculum materials; professional organizations at the national level promote best practices in the field, like the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD); and each academic discipline features multiple professional journals studying curriculum practices in their respective content area.

A common approach in curriculum research is to focus on the impact of the materials themselves, and this type of research is often used to advocate for the adoption of specific textbooks. For example, Koedel and Polikoff (2017) reviewed all math textbook adoptions in K-8 schools in California from 2003-2013 and compared the achievement outcomes of schools in relation to the materials they used. Ultimately, the researchers found that one math textbook consistently outperformed other curricula, with a comparative effect size of .05 to .08 standard deviations *per* year over four years (p. 4). While the magnitude of observed change was small, it was consistent, suggesting that the cumulative effect of a single resource choice could have significant impact on the education of a student body of a particular school.

In another study focused on literacy acquisition, Borman et al. (2008) studied the impact of the Open Court Reading (OCR) curriculum on students in predominately low-income schools. In an experimental design where 49 first- through fifth-grade classrooms were assigned a treatment condition of exposure to the OCR program or a no-treatment "business-as-usual" condition, the researchers found that students who experienced the OCR curriculum had significantly higher achievement in reading composite, vocabulary, and reading comprehension tests (p. 402). Most significantly, the context of this study focused on populations of greater than 70% minority students and students who receive free- or reduced-lunch, suggesting that intentional selection of curriculum materials could be an effective means for reducing the well-documented achievement gap for these communities.

In a separate study of the effectiveness of Mathematics curricula, Bhatt and Koedel (2012) measured the differences in student achievement between three elementary Math programs that were in use in the state of Indiana. By comparing the performance of cohorts of students on ISTEP, the Indiana state assessment, Bhatt and Koedel found that there were significant differences between cohorts that had fully adopted each of the different curriculum

programs. Interestingly, the authors noted that the textbook that had the largest market share in Indiana also was the one that had the weakest performance, and Bhatt and Koedel conclude that perhaps "educational decision makers lack information about differences in curricular effectiveness" (p. 391).

It is findings like these that have led policy advocates to focus on curriculum reform as a major lever for improving student outcomes. Steiner (2017), in a policy brief and literature review, emphasizes the *cumulative* impact of curriculum, writing

> Most research studies focus on the impact of a curriculum over one or two years. But over time, even a small annual effect size of +0.10, beginning in first grade, could become an effect size of +0.60 by the end of fifth grade—approximately the equivalent of a student scoring in the 74th percentile versus the 50th percentile (p. 2)

In recognition of these types of achievement gains associated with curriculum selection, the United States Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences has created a publicly available resource called the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). The WWC is a searchable database of researched curricula that provides descriptions of the resources in context with its documented effect size. Its intended use is to help school administrators and classroom teachers make informed decisions about the resources they use in their classrooms. In Steiner's review of the effect sizes of resources available on the WWC, he writes that "schools that switched from business as usual to one of these instructional methods could move students' performance from the 50th to the 60th or even 70th percentile. When extrapolated across an entire class, grade, or school, such impacts could prove transformative" (p. 2).

Whitehurst (2009) puts the impact of curriculum selection within the context of other major educational policy topics. In a policy brief and literature review for the Brookings institute, Whitehurst compared the effect sizes on student achievement documented in

curriculum research studies to those of other educational 'hot topics,' like charter schools, Head Start preschool programs, Teach for America's pipeline for new teachers, and even state standards (p. 9). Based on his review, Whitehurst concluded that "curriculum effects are large compared to most popular policy levers," arguing that existing research showed curriculum provided stronger impacts in mathematics, vocabulary, and progressing in school (p. 9).

There is also research to suggest that responsible curriculum selection practices can be a relatively low-cost intervention to support student achievement, especially when compared to other popular types of academic intervention. In a literature review for Johns Hopkins' Institute for Educational Policy, Bjorklund-Young (2016) reviewed studies comparing the impact of specific curricula on student achievement. The studies were highlighted because they were examples of randomized experiments designed to test the actual impact of curricula used in schools. The findings and recommendations from these studies were consistent with other curriculum research: specific curriculum materials *do* have an impact on student outcomes (p. 3). One salient point asserted by Bjorklund-Young was that, in each of the separate research studies, the schools implementing the curriculum resources had already planned for and included curriculum costs in their annual budgets (p. 4). In other words, the benefits of a curriculum on student achievement are *already* paid for – districts just need to be making the right curriculum choices.

In a similarly aligned study, Boser et al. (2015) analyzed the existing curricular landscape in 2014 in terms of state-level textbook adoption practices. By comparing curricula impact data from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences with available pricing data from publishers, the authors found that curricular investment was a relatively low-cost intervention for schools and states. In their findings, Boser et al. found that the highest impact elementary math curriculum cost approximately $36 per student (p. 1).

These types of studies raise an important question for both researchers and practitioners: *How do we identify the best curriculum materials to serve our students?* One particularly interesting study is the Core Knowledge case examined by Springfield et al. (2000). This study examined the impact of specified, sequenced curriculum on student achievement through a three-year longitudinal study of schools implementing the Core Knowledge curriculum for elementary schools developed by the Core Knowledge foundation. In this mixed methods study of twelve school districts across multiple states, researchers conducted surveys, interviews, and observations with teachers and also examined student achievement results in these districts. What was most interesting was that, while the researchers did observe increased student achievement in each of the schools with high fidelity of implementation, they attributed the improvement not to the Core Knowledge program itself, but simply to the fact that the curriculum was "specified" (p. vi). Springfield et al. extrapolated that the results they observed "may be applicable to other specified curricula, even a fully articulated curricular sequence developed by the schools themselves" (p. vi). With a specified curriculum, there was "little guesswork for teachers of what to teach" and "teachers mostly saw the provision of a specific curriculum as a relief, rather than an imposition" (pp. 108, 106). What this study suggests is that a positive student achievement effect can be observed simply from having *any curriculum*, let alone the effects observed between one curriculum compared to another.

This same type of effect was observed by Palombo (2003) when studying the benefits of what can happen when school districts successfully collaborate to define their curriculum. Documenting the case of Ipswich Public Schools in Massachusetts, Palombo describes how the district's teachers responded to a decline in test scores by creating instructional teams to design and map their internal curriculum. In this case, teachers participated in guided resource exploration, focused lesson development, and collaborative peer review. The end result was that

the district more than doubled the number of students scoring proficient or better on their 4th grade state assessment and the district rose above the state average on the 8th grade assessment. Additional benefits of the project included a "greater consistency in expectations of both students and teachers" (p. 24).

These examples of curriculum research show that different curriculum programs can clearly lead to different outcomes for students. With more available data about the effect size of specific curriculum materials, educational entities can more purposefully select which materials they will adopt for their school communities. However, where much of the research focuses on the question of *what materials are best*, other research suggests that focusing on *how materials are used* may be more important. Above all, however, is the unified opinion that, in order for learning outcomes to be maximized, an intentional and planned curriculum program must *exist*.

The Curriculum Research Gap

Within the field of curriculum research, one common focus of academic papers is simply a recognition of the limited volume of existing research and lack of comprehensive data about curriculum use. Indeed, the work of defining the enacted curriculum is broad in scope and is a massive task at any grade level, let alone across the disciplines. The many overlapping materials, like daily assignments, assessments, unit plans, standards, and scope and sequence documents present a challenge for *what to study* while the interplay between school context and teacher interaction present challenges for *how to study it*. While attempts at generalizing the curriculum have been made, researchers often conclude that the record is inconsistent and ill-defined, leaving them with more questions about *what the curriculum actually is* than answers.

Researchers began sounding the alarm bells about the nation's limited documentation of the curriculum in the early 1990s. In a massive review of nearly 200 studies about the curricula of the four core subjects, Gehrke et al. (1992) eventually concluded that no explicit written

record of the curriculum existed at that time. While the researchers initially believed their work would simply be categorizing common findings, they ultimately concluded that wide variability in curriculum existed. Interestingly, Gehrke et al. also found that the research record had a tendency to *assume* that the curriculum practices of research from decades prior were static and still remained the status quo. Despite this assumption, Gehrke et al. recognized that individual teachers *do* modify curriculum materials on a day-to-day basis, noting that curriculum *must* change over time. Gehrke et al., however, saw that existing curriculum research at that time was incapable of describing or coding these types of changes or measuring their impact on student outcomes.

In more modern times, this trend has continued. In a widely cited report about the status of the research record on curriculum materials, Chingos and Whitehurst (2012) identify what they perceive as significant challenges with the type and quality of data available to policymakers. In what they describe as a "scandalous lack of information," Chingos and Whitehurst write that, while strong evidence exists showing that materials can have significant effects on student learning, little data exists about the effect of specific curriculum materials, and that there is even less data around what materials schools are using (p. 1). The authors note that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) "collects no information on the usage of particular instructional materials," writing that "in every state except one, it is impossible to find out what materials districts are currently using without contacting the districts one at a time to ask them" (p. 1).

Similar to the documented gap in the literature around *what* is being taught by the curriculum, other researchers have described a research gap around *how* curriculum is implemented. Curriculum fidelity, the degree by which a curriculum is implemented as intended, is an important measure for determining whether or not a curriculum is actually being used. In a

meta-analysis reviewing over 120 articles about fidelity of implementation in K-12 settings, O'Donnell (2008) demonstrates major gaps in the literature around curriculum use in public schools. Most importantly, O'Donnell identified that "no universal data collection tools exist" to measure fidelity across studies or across contexts (p. 54). Further, O'Donnell explains that curriculum fidelity is often in competition with other educational concepts; for instance, innovative teaching is often contrasted with the perceived rigidity of written curriculum, curriculum adaptation is often interpreted as diminishing fidelity, and that "curriculum-in-theory" is rarely "curriculum-in-use" (p. 54). These mixed-messages to educators about such a foundational component of our education system may leave practitioners with unclear guideposts for what they actually *should do* with their curriculum.

Only recently have trends began to shift in curriculum research. Hattie's (2009) work towards his *Visible Learning* initiative invigorated the call for clearer, evaluative research in the field of education. In response to that call, organizations like The Institute of Education Sciences (2016), a sub-unit of the U.S. Department of Education, has founded the What Works Clearinghouse, a resource dedicated to evaluating the existing research around specific education interventions, including curriculum materials, "to provide educators with the information they need to make evidence-based decisions" (para. 1). Whitehurst (2009) has contributed to the importance of this argument by showing that the effect sizes of certain curriculum interventions outperform more popular structural interventions, like state standards or charter schools. Now, researchers like Koedel and Polikoff (2017) have begun to evaluate the effect size of specific curriculum materials, like textbooks, on student achievement.

Despite a growing emphasis on curriculum research, there is also considerable consensus that more work needs to be done. Bjorklund-Young (2016) underscores the need for more experimental research, arguing that while the field of education is beginning to learn *what*

materials are stronger than others, we still do not know *why* one set of curriculum materials is better than another. Similarly, Steiner (2017) notes that (1) "no industry or research standards exist around fidelity of implementation," (2) there is no universal measurement for academic progress, and (3) that curriculum research compares interventions with "business as usual, but what constitutes business as usual […] can vary" (p. 2). These challenges hearken back to the initial debate about *defining* curriculum – until the specific parameters of what constitutes curriculum can be defined, the subject will remain difficult to study.

Taylor (2016), in her literature review, makes specific recommendations for future research based on common assumptions she identified in the literature. Specifically, Taylor noted that most curriculum research is singularly focused on particular resources, testing their effective impact against each other; very little research exists on what makes curriculum use effective *independent* of a certain curriculum publisher. Taylor argues that a growing body of literature suggests that instructional effectiveness is achieved through effective interaction between the teacher and the established curriculum, advocating for more research to identify what teacher practices in relation to the curriculum have the largest effect on student achievement. In her words, "perhaps the most effective ways in which teachers can use curriculum materials involve an extensive curriculum vision: a comprehensive understanding of the scope, goals, and philosophy of a set of curriculum materials" (p. 443).

These calls to action underscore a growing awareness that the field of curriculum research is not always aligned to the practical applications of curriculum in the field. While there is consistency in understanding that curriculum is *important*, the field has yet to define which *elements* of curriculum are important and why. While specific curricula can be measured to test its influence on student achievement, such research rests on an assumption that such a

curriculum model *exists* in schools and is able to be carried out by the practitioner with fidelity to its original intent.

The Status of the Curriculum in American Schools

In order to better understand how curriculum is implemented in America's schools, it is important to position the topic of curriculum in the broader historical landscape that has influenced how curriculum in public schools has changed over time. Like other aspects of public education, the curriculum itself is subject to legislative reform, changing national goals, and the restrictions of educational funding. While such changes can be observed from the origins of public schooling, I will begin this discussion with the modern standards reform movement, highlighting events in recent history that have had significant impact on the status of the curriculum in American schools.

The Standards Reform Movement

In the 1990s, fueled by global competition and the rising academic achievement of other nations, greater focus was placed on American schools as policymakers identified the education system as a vehicle to help U.S. industry compete in a global economy. In what became known as the Standards Reform Movement, a simultaneous emphasis on standardization of practices and accountability for learning spread across the nation.

Educational theorists and policymakers began to advocate for more explicit achievement benchmarks for schools accomplished by a national curriculum. Schmoker and Marzano (1999), both strong advocates for educational reform, asked the public to "consider a school where teachers know exactly what essential skills and knowledge students should learn that year and where they know that their colleagues are teaching to the same manageable standards" (p. 19). They promoted the development of "a living bank of proven, standards-referenced instructional materials -- lessons, units, and assessments perfected through action research" and the

implementation of "proven methods, practices, and lessons aligned with established standards" (pp. 19-20). Ultimately, it was their hope that this type of curricular standardization would lead "to better short- and long-term results on local and state assessments as well as on norm-referenced, alternative and criterion-referenced assessments," yielding better outcomes for students across the United States (p. 20).

Similarly, Ravitch and Cortese (2009) advocated for the adoption of a national set of standards by making comparisons to other developed nations. Citing findings from a report by Common Core, Ravitch and Cortese showed that countries like Korea and Finland already had a national curriculum and that other successful nations were already following suit. They saw that other high-performing countries established national curriculum standards, national assessments and exit exams, and even used national curriculum resource materials that explicitly describe what students need to *know* and what teachers need to *teach*.

Following this thinking, in 2002 the United States overhauled educational policy with legislation entitled No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Within this legislation, each states' Title I funding through the federal government was tied to their ability to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on nationally normed assessments. However, AYP requirements were so stringent that most states failed to meet them, and eventually 42 states needed to file for waivers from NCLB with the federal government. In order to qualify for a waiver, states needed to agree to adopt research-based curriculum standards, and it was through this mechanism that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted by many states across the nation. The CCSS framework represented the first nation-wide attempt by the US Department of Education at laying the groundwork for a universal curriculum across the United States.

However, this accountability movement did not have the immediate, positive curricular implications that were initially hoped for. While some achievement gains documented on national assessments like the NAEP (see Huntley, 2009), those gains appeared to come at a cost. Many districts floundered with the requirement of such a massive curriculum overhaul and voices from the field began to bring concern about the impact of NCLB on daily instructional practices. In a large-scale study of practitioner perspectives of NCLB across three states and 27 school districts, Hamilton et al. (2007) found that the heightened sense of accountability brought the need to align curriculum to state standards into focus for both teachers and administrators. This focus tended to lead towards a narrowing of the curriculum, driving teachers to focus specifically on the assessed subjects of math and reading to the detriment of other subject areas. In tandem with this trend, teachers began to associate these changes "with reduced morale and expressed concerns about negative effects on their teaching" (p. xx).

While the intent of the standards reform movement was to develop more rigorous curriculum practices in American schools, the accountability systems began to have a deleterious effect, shifting schools' focus from learning to *testing*. Au (2007), in his meta-synthesis of existing literature, found a strong correlation between high-stakes testing and a narrowing of the curriculum. Examining 49 existing studies, Au demonstrated that, while there are some outlier cases where high-stakes tests influence curriculum creativity, most schools responded by constricting the programming offered to students as districts and teachers decided to focus exclusively on the content of the tests.

As a case example, Ogawa et al. (2003) document one district's attempt to implement a standards-based curriculum in a medium-sized district in California, exemplifying the challenges faced by districts as they tried to convert to a new instructional mindset. By reviewing institutional artifacts (including curriculum documents, meeting agendas, and lesson plans),

holding interviews with 23 of the district's teachers as well as the district leadership team, and conducting observations, Ogawa et al. reviewed the process and the impact of the district's reform efforts. In the article, Ogawa et al. analyzed the district by contrasting two organizational frameworks: (1) a rational perspective, oriented around the systematic pursuit of organizational goals and (2) an institutional perspective, characterized by *a lack* of clear goals in pursuit of survival and supporting the status quo. Through their case study, Ogawa et al. document a district curriculum process that is strictly controlled from the organizational 'top', limiting teacher influence. Ogawa et al. produce two major findings: (1) "rationalistic reform strategies, such as the adoption of curriculum standards, may be inherently limited because of the complexities of teaching", and (2) "establishing standards as the sole indicators of academic achievement may work against educational improvement" (p. 173). Their study culminates with this final thought: "Our findings suggest that, when teachers and site administrators are held accountable for student performance on a narrow range of subjects, standards severely restrict the curriculum and instructional practices of teachers. The problem may lie in a failure to treat standards as guides that teachers incorporate in their overall curriculum and teaching" (pp. 173-174).

In this light, the standards reform movement can be viewed almost paradoxically. While its intent was to create curriculum uniformity, leading to a more comprehensive school experience, the result was, in many cases, the *reduction* of curricula available to students. One constant for schools in this era was curriculum *change*; the demand of aligning to new standards across the country required that local curriculum resources came under review nation-wide. New curricula were adopted, older resources became obsolete, and district teams tried to ensure that quality classroom learning was not lost in the transition.

The Modern Curriculum Context

Just as the standards reform movement began to cement itself by forcing a national set of standards onto states, rising critical voices began to advocate for a loosening of accountability measures and a return to local control. Eventually, NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, and, while its focus remained intent on promoting a national vision for K-12 education, it significantly reduced the accountability requirements for public schools. After a period of working towards national alignment, states began to return to their own curricular priorities.

Within this relaxation of accountability, Gewertz (2015) documents the loosening of states' requirements to use specific curriculum materials, ceding more authority to local decision-making about curriculum use. Within the past five years of when the study was conducted, fewer and fewer states were described as 'adoption states' requiring their schools to select from an approved list of curriculum materials. Some states make no curriculum recommendations to schools at all. Those that still did were easing restrictions, allowing for more local control or providing waivers around the approved process.

Similarly, Boser et al. (2015) also surveyed existing state policies to better understand state-level curriculum adoption processes. Mapping the U.S. into different regions, the authors found that states were much more likely to recommend curriculum materials to schools in the south whereas they were much more likely to have open adoption policies (or make no recommendations) in the North (p. 9). Boser et al. make clear recommendations for states *and* districts to improve their textbook adoption process by making curriculum criteria more explicit, focusing more heavily on outcomes-based curriculum adoptions. However, Boser et al. found that many states have recently walked back some of their adoption policies, providing more discretion to local districts and allowing for more open practices in the field.

In this modern era, Hirsch (2016) saw popular educational theories eroding the notion of a strong curriculum framework. In his writing for the Harvard Education Press, he notes an historic narrowing of the curriculum as the nation began to focus on high stakes tests, forcing teachers to scrap existing curriculum materials and instead focus on test preparation. He also critiques how other debunked educational theories, like the 'multiple intelligences' theory and the hyper-attentive focus on the *individual* child, have led teachers away from common materials and towards ad hoc material selection based on what they *think* is best. Hirsch writes that "the result has been a fragmented elementary curriculum with unpredictable topics being studied in different classrooms at the same grade level within the same school" (p. 63).

In addition to the critiques of the national reform movement, there are also formal barriers to a more organized and uniform curriculum process at the national level. The Department of Education Organization Act of 1979 actually bars the U.S. Department of Education from endorsing specific curriculum materials. The act reads "No provision of a program administered by the Secretary or by any officer of the Department shall be construed to authorize the Secretary or any such officer to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, [...] textbooks, or other instructional materials by any educational institution [...]." Similar prohibitions can be found in other education-related acts, like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Whitehurst, 2009).

Adding to the challenge of a cohesive vision for public school curriculum, there are many stakeholders competing for control of those school-level resources. Just as the federal government contests with states over curricular control, and as states engage similarly with local districts, teachers and administrators similarly wrestle with the question of curriculum ownership. For example, Bascia et al. (2014), in their case study of three teacher-driven

curriculum initiatives, document the impact of "teacher agency" and how, in certain cases, teachers have been able to shift curriculum policy (p. 244). On the opposite side, researchers like Huntley (2009) advocate for more specific tools to hold teachers accountable to curriculum fidelity, arguing that "valid evaluations of […] curricula are predicated on teachers using textbooks in ways that are faithful to the authors' intent" (p. 355).

In recent times, there has also been a new call for more parental and community ownership of the curriculum as well. With the cultural and political turmoil that has emerged in the 2020's, significant pressure has been placed on school boards across the country to accommodate voices within their communities by making curricular adaptations. For example, in 2021, parent voices raised against one particular Michigan school district's inclusion of texts that focused on LGBTQ+ topics, and, as pressure mounted, administrators later admitted to pulling books from classroom shelves to appease community voices (Samples, 2021; Samples, 2023). Other districts in the state have seen heated, and at times violent, school board confrontations focused on either promoting diversity initiatives in districts or, conversely, banning discussions around 'Critical Race Theory' (Frick, 2021). These types of local pressure campaigns focused around race and gender issues have even impacted national curriculum conversations, as can be observed by Florida's recent banning of a new AP African American Studies course and Texas's decision not to update its Social Studies curriculum standards (Hartocollis & Fawcett, 2023; Lopez, 2022). While certainly parents have the right to be involved in their child's education and to voice their opinions in public board meetings, this new style of curricular decision-making has the potential to create immediate, large-scale curriculum disruption at the local level.

Occurring alongside the socio-political debates currently impacting curriculum, educators have simultaneously needed to respond to the massive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As federal, state, and local governments put health and safety measures in place, schools were

required to respond to social distancing requirements with new methods, including virtual instruction and the adoption of digital learning management systems (LMSs) for content delivery. These fast-paced adaptations, while necessary, also have had curricular implications. In a nation-wide survey of 800 K-12 teachers serving traditional public schools and public school academies, Educators for Excellence (2021) examined teachers' experiences of teaching during the pandemic. The researchers found that "only half of all teachers report their curricula to be high quality and well aligned to learning standards" (p. 18). They reported this challenge made the task of adapting materials to virtual instruction more challenging. Moreover, this trend was more evident with teachers who served low-income students, students of color, and EL students, reinforcing the already present achievement gap impacting those populations of students.

With so many evolving policy initiatives, competing stakeholders, and social changes, there has been significant opportunity in recent history for curriculum work to become fragmented and misaligned. Just as one opportunity arises to align curriculum to a particular vision, a different voice seeks to discontinue the work in order to move in another direction. This discontinuity has significant implications for the classroom; with each curricular change, new work must begin to understand the new curriculum goals, become familiar with new curriculum resources, and formalize curriculum implementation plans. Previous resources become obsolete and eventually disappear, creating opportunity for the curriculum to become *missing* altogether, even in the midst of a curriculum reform initiative.

Evidence of a Missing Curriculum

Despite the growing body of evidence showing the importance of using quality curriculum materials, there is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that this is *not* what is happening in American schools. One of the biggest assumptions of the curriculum research field is that curriculum *actually exists* in schools and that what school districts have documented on

paper is what is transpiring in the classroom. Recent research on teachers' instructional practices reveals that, in many cases, what occurs day-to-day in the classroom is frequently determined by individual teachers' designs for student learning, often because of lack of access to teaching materials or a negative perception of the materials that do exist.

In a report by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) (2020), the authors reviewed multiple studies focused on teachers' experiences with curriculum-related practices. NIET's literature review identified that fewer than half of teachers identify with having access to quality curriculum resources, that teachers receive limited professional development around curriculum implementation, and that teachers often create their own materials to fill the resource gap when materials are not provided. NIET's recommendations for supporting teachers with curriculum implementation include the need for additional focus from school-level leadership on curriculum support and the creation of intentional school-level structures to support curriculum development and implementation.

In a similar report, The Tennessee Department of Education's (2019) most recent annual survey of its teachers yielded important findings about teachers' perceptions of curriculum materials at use in the state of Tennessee. This survey of more than 40,000 public school teachers identified that nearly 40% of Tennessee teachers do not believe that they have access to adequate instructional materials and over 50% of teachers do not believe that they have access to adequate assessment materials. Within the research, it was apparent that teachers' perception of curriculum quality appears to be an important predictor of how teachers prepare for daily instruction. Over 60% of Tennessee teachers spent more than four hours per week creating their own materials and nearly 20% reported that they spent over 10 hours *per week* designing their own curriculum materials. Teachers who taught in urban areas were more likely to report these perceptions than teachers who taught in other settings. Interestingly, teachers who *did* report they

had access to high quality instructional materials were also much more likely to report that they had adequate planning time provided by their district.

When teachers do not have access to prepared curriculum materials or they do not have confidence in the quality of materials that are present, they improvise, finding and creating materials on their own. In a report for the Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research, Blazar et al. (2019) analyzed the impact of various Common Core aligned mathematics textbooks. In a first-of-its-kind study in the Common Core era, the researchers compared achievement data from approximately 6,000 schools to state records of school's fourth and fifth grade recent textbook adoptions. Additionally, Blazar et al. administered a survey to roughly 1,200 teachers across six states about their textbook usage. Within this survey data, Blazar et al. identified that nearly 25% of responding teachers used materials they found on the internet in more than half of their lessons and that only 7% of teachers relied exclusively on a district provided textbook. More importantly, the degree to which teachers supplemented curriculum with other materials was correlated with their perception of the quality of the textbook provided by the school.

In another survey of over 2,000 K-12 teachers from California, Louisiana, New York, and New Mexico, Opfer et al. (2017) studied the alignment between states' adoption of Common Core State Standards and the *actual* resources used by teachers in the classroom. Opfer et al. had several important findings, including that the use of teacher-created resources was "widespread" (p. xv). Regarding teacher-created resources, Opfer et al. found that secondary educators were more likely to report that they created their own materials than elementary educators, that secondary educators were less likely to be required by their districts to use particular materials, and that teachers serving in districts with greater than 75% students receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL) were more likely to draw on resources from the internet. Opfer et al. suggested that

these teachers may "not receive the same supports and guidance from their state and district" or that "high-FRL schools may not have as many in-school/district resources on which to draw" (pp. xiv-xv). This study highlights the contextual factors influencing curriculum implementation, including the differences between affluent and high-poverty districts as well as the differences between elementary and secondary schools.

When teachers source their own curriculum materials, however, the result is wide variability in resource quality and content from classroom to classroom. Kaufman et al. (2018) found that many teachers report sourcing non-vetted classroom materials from the internet, despite the nation-wide policy shift towards Common Core aligned resources. In a national survey of approximately 1,700 K-12 teachers by RAND, Kaufman et al. identified that TeachersPayTeachers and Pinterest were commonly shared as places to draw classroom content from, with some teachers stating they used these sites "regularly (once a week or more)" (p. 10). While the survey did not identify *why* teachers used these materials (as opposed to standards-aligned textbooks), respondents who served populations of at-risk students were more likely to report that they depended on these online resources.

In a consumer report studying trends in teachers as *customers* of curriculum materials, Goldberg (2016) documented the significant financial resources and time teachers invest in securing curriculum materials. In a national survey of over 1,300 K-12 teachers from MDR's National K-12 Education Market Database, Goldberg found that 66% of teachers reported that they used materials they created at least once per week, compared to 51% reporting weekly use of commercial materials provided by the district. Additionally, Goldberg found that 69% "spend four or more hours per week creating instructional resources," 52% "spend four or more hours per week searching for free resources," and "23% spend the same time searching for priced resources for the classroom" (p. 2). This survey also identified that teachers are often sourcing

materials from online resources like YouTube, Pinterest, and Facebook. Steiner (2017) documents a similar trend, with 91% of mathematics teachers and 85% of ELA teachers using their own materials "at least once a week" at the secondary level (p. 6). Steiner concludes that "the preponderance of teacher-chosen and teacher-developed materials illustrates the difficulty of measuring impact, as well as the apparent rarity of sequenced study in America's classrooms" (p. 6).

These studies suggest that a significant portion of the American classroom curriculum experience is being developed by an ad hoc method at the individual classroom level. Without quality curriculum materials to support them, teachers are expending considerable time, effort, and resources to create meaningful learning opportunities for their students. However, in such an environment of curricular disarray, it is impossible to determine if the materials that teachers are sourcing are actually of any quality, and it is impossible to align materials within a district's course progression in order to maximize their effect.

The Teacher and the Curriculum

It must be recognized that teachers themselves are an important determiner in how students interact with the curriculum. Ultimately, it is the choices *they* make that controls the actual curriculum, despite what is written on district pacing guides or state standards documents. Individual teachers' professional experience, beliefs and attitudes, and instructional decision-making each influence what the teacher intends to teach, how the lesson is implemented, and, ultimately, what students experience in the classroom.

Ball and Cohen (1996), two educational researchers at the University of Michigan, describe the historical relationship between curriculum materials and teacher practices. In an essay published in *Educational Researcher*, Ball and Cohen identify (1) that curriculum developers fail "to appreciate teachers' need to learn in order to use new materials," (2) "that in

the United States [...] individual teachers shape the curriculum in fundamental ways", and (3) that teachers themselves "often disparage textbooks", preferring instead to advocate for instructional autonomy (p. 6). Ball and Cohen write that "our system typically lacks strong curricular guidance" and therefore "teachers necessarily select from and adapt materials to suit their own students" (p. 6).

In an effort to better understand how to support teachers' fidelity to the prescribed curriculum, Kulo and Cates (2013) present a case study where they functioned as a curriculum design team interacting with a classroom science teacher. In their study, Kulo & Cates worked alongside a teacher, training her in the curriculum program and the built-in instructional strategies and requisite content, and then they observed the teacher to measure the fidelity of implementation. Through their observations, Kulo and Cates found that implementation ranged from approximately 90% fidelity in content-based lessons to approximately 50% fidelity in lab-based or inquiry-based lessons. Kulo and Cates concluded that teachers are likely to adapt curriculum materials for a variety of reasons, including their own beliefs about teaching, their skill level and familiarity with the practices included in the curriculum, and a range of local factors. This underscores the true variability of curriculum practices; *even with* direct monitoring and intentional training, classrooms can range in their fidelity to the curriculum plan, leaving those classrooms without intentional collaboration practices with little hope of strong curriculum alignment.

In this light, it is important to understand *why* teachers make the curricular decisions that they do. In a study of a single case, Brown and Edelson (2003) observed a teacher throughout a unit in order to better understand the ways in which teachers interact with curriculum materials. The researchers tracked her typical day-to-day planning and how she interacted with her district-provided curriculum. At the conclusion of the study, Brown and Edelson decided teacher

adaptation and experimentation with curriculum materials were a given, stating "(a) curriculum materials play an important role in affording and constraining teachers' actions; (b) teachers notice and use such artifacts differently given their experience, intentions and abilities; (c) teaching by design is not so much a conscious choice but an inevitable reality" (p. 1). Brown and Edelson attribute this fluctuation with curriculum materials to (1) "their understanding of the subject matter", (2) "their familiarity with the recommended instructional strategies", (3) "their knowledge of student understanding", and (4) "their beliefs about teaching and learning" (p. 4).

Research has documented that teacher beliefs have a significant impact on the choices that they make in the classroom. Roehrig and Kruse (2005) conducted a mixed-methods study, using both quantitative and qualitative measures, to examine how teachers' beliefs and their curriculum resources influenced their classroom instruction. By observing 12 teachers using an inquiry-based observation protocol and holding interviews, Roehrig and Kruse found that teacher beliefs had a significant impact on teachers' ability to adopt new curricula and new instructional practices. Additionally, they found that access to a reform-based curriculum heightened their ability to adopt these new practices. Roehrig and Kruse (2005) also found that teacher practices are often not aligned with the type of pedagogy emphasized by state standards. Similarly, they find that the term *curriculum*, often meaning a particular textbook or program, also often fails to align with the practices coded into the standards. In such a context, where interpretive work is required with the existing materials of the district, Roehrig and Kruse state that "teachers typically lack the time and knowledge needed to modify existing curricular materials" (p. 412).

Interestingly, teachers and their principals are often misaligned in their beliefs about curriculum and decision-making, and that misalignment can also have a big impact on how teachers approach their jobs. Brezicha et al. (2019) found in their research studying the 2013 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey that a significant discrepancy exists between

principals' and teachers' perceptions of teacher participation in school decision-making, including around decisions about *what to teach*. More importantly, examining the responses of 1,335 American secondary educators, they found that the wider the gap between teachers' and principals' beliefs, the greater the negative impact on teacher job satisfaction. If teachers experience little to no curriculum support *and* their voices are barred from the process of curricular decision-making, there is significant potential for teachers' needs to go perpetually unmet, allowing a continuous strain on our educational system to persist.

What Successful Curriculum Interaction Looks Like

While teachers may face many challenges in their pursuit of sound curriculum practices, there are many documented examples of what successful curriculum practice looks like amongst teachers and within districts. These examples, often presented through case study, focus on documenting the types of experiences that shape or contribute to the successful implementation of curriculum materials in classrooms. Across these studies, specialized training, frequent collaboration, and high degrees of support appear as positive forces in the research of curriculum use.

For example, Hodges and Jong (2014) write about how site-based communities of practice, sometimes referred to as professional learning communities, can support teachers' understanding and use of instructional materials. In a case study of two mathematics teachers serving students in Appalachia, Hodges and Jong set out to study the impact of professional learning in supporting teachers at establishing site-based communities of practice. In their findings, Hodges and Jong discovered that local differences in school-level collaboration norms had a greater impact on the teacher's ability to use and develop Common Core aligned instructional materials. One case study participant, who worked in an environment with

traditions of teacher-level collaboration, found success in developing her curricular practices, while the other, serving a school with limited support for curricular collaboration, did not.

Successful teachers are intentional about how they use curriculum. They are mindful about what materials they select for a particular lesson and how those resources will help students accomplish learning goals in relation to the specified standards. In a study aimed to describe how teachers successfully interact with curriculum resources, Dietiker et al. (2018) defined a framework for curriculum interaction. Within their framework, Dietiker et al. outlined three phases of teacher interaction with curriculum: (1) curricular attending, where teachers select appropriate materials; (2) curricular interpreting, where teachers relate the materials to their respective context; and (3) curricular responding, where teachers reflect on the materials used. Describing the framework as "Curricular Noticing," Dietiker et al. hope to build a bridge between what teachers *notice* during instruction and how they intentionally select curriculum materials for future lessons (p. 521).

Just as training gaps can exacerbate a teacher's challenges with curriculum practices, focused curriculum training can lead to positive outcomes for teachers. Taylor (2013) provides a look into how teacher professional development influences teachers' use of curriculum materials. In Taylor's case study, four secondary mathematics teachers participated in a graduate level class at a local university focused on curriculum adaptation. Through observations, interviews, and artifact reviews, Taylor found that as teachers continued through the development program, they became more willing to make adaptations to the written curriculum based on their own expertise as well as student needs. Taylor also found that teachers with more experience were more likely to make more curriculum adaptations.

Similarly, Paik et al. (2011) studied the impact participating in professional development had on teachers' ability to meet state standards. In their study, 77 Michigan science teachers

participated in a two-week long professional development program focused around aligning science instruction to state curriculum standards, responding to pre- and post-assessments before and after participating in the program. The researchers found that "collaboration with colleagues and facilitators helped teachers achieve their goals in terms of teaching within state curriculum standards" (p. 422). Participants responded that they increased content knowledge, learned new instructional strategies, and gathered new resources by participating.

In another case study of one particular middle school classroom, Gunckel and Moore (2005) created a school-university partnership that established a curriculum-focused professional learning community. Through their model, Gunckel and Moore guided both teacher and students through reflective curriculum design by conducting observations, gathering feedback, and holding focus group sessions around lesson implementation. Through this work, they found that the teacher was able to alter his pedagogy to create more effective lesson plans based on observed student needs; however, they also noted that once the partnership ceased to exist, so too did the curriculum innovation, suggesting a potential ongoing, environmental support is needed to sustain successful curriculum practices.

Studying what successful curriculum interaction looks like may serve as a basis for understanding the types of environmental supports that may be helpful for new teachers. Structured systems for teaching teams to collaborate around curriculum implementation, focused training on curriculum practices, and intentional coaching on curriculum implementation all appear to be important ingredients for successful curriculum use. Of course, all of these factors rely on the assumption that a sound curriculum framework and supplemental instructional materials are present so that teaching teams may develop their skills in using them.

The Case of the New Teacher

While a fractured curriculum presents an occupational challenge to *all* teachers, the plight of the new teacher is especially precarious, and the importance of strong curriculum guardrails to support teaching and learning in their classrooms is magnified. The challenges of being a new teacher are well documented; one of the most common issues cited by new teachers is simply the difficulty of meeting the demands of the job alongside the lack of support they receive when trying to do so. New teachers have been shown to be susceptible to burnout, even within the first five years of their careers (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Because of this, a wide range of research has focused on identifying the specific challenges new teachers face. Although curriculum is not often explicitly addressed, it is in this body of research where testimonials from new teachers reference frustration from a general lack of clear expectations, an absence of material supports, and the stresses of creating lesson plans and classroom materials from scratch.

For example, Smeaton and Waters (2013) investigated the many challenges new teachers experience when starting their careers. The researchers conducted observations, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups with six secondary school teachers who were part of the researchers' pedagogy classes at an American university. Teachers described particular difficulty in navigating the multiple unclear and competing expectations around curriculum that they faced alongside a lack of provided materials. Of the materials not provided, teachers lamented the lack of assessments, needing to build them on their own without the support of their district colleagues. Teachers described needing to invest an inordinate amount of time for lesson planning, especially when juggling multiple preps at the secondary level.

Similarly, McCann and Johannessen (2004) begin to describe some of the challenges new teachers face in terms of curriculum resources. In their qualitative study interviewing 11 high school English teachers, McCann and Johannessen aimed to identify why new teachers are so

likely to turnover and leave the profession. While their study primarily focused on classroom management struggles and emotional health, the participants did identify particular struggles with workload, especially related to lesson planning, and curriculum focus, wondering "what is *really* important to teach?" and "what *principles* guide the development of the curriculum?" (p. 139). As an extreme example, one respondent described episodes of "dry-heaving" and recurrent "anxiety" throughout the first year, detailing feelings of being constantly unprepared in terms of lesson planning and a general sense of inadequacy when comparing himself to his mentor teacher (p. 140).

In a single-case study of one second-year elementary school teacher, Fry (2010) documented the case of a new teacher who quit the field of teaching, despite having participated in a first-year induction program designed to retain new teachers. Through observations and interviews, Fry detailed the challenges this teacher faced, despite the induction support. Some of the specific challenges described by the participant focused on her challenges around curriculum. The participant discussed the difficulty she had with creating materials "from scratch," stating that "the curriculum is so wide open. On the one hand that is good, because there is flexibility. On the other I feel like I'm not doing anything. I'm just not sure where to go" (pp. 1176, 1174). While the participant reported that she sometimes asked for help, she felt guilty taking additional time from her colleagues.

The Public Education Network (2004) aimed to identify positive and negative influences on new teachers' jobs as well as seek feedback from new teachers about common components of induction programs. Surveying and interviewing over 200 teachers across five states, the researchers found that some teachers described instances where their school district failed to furnish them with any curriculum or instructional materials when the school year began. Beyond initial materials, teachers also voiced that they experienced an expectation to differentiate

curriculum for learners with different needs; however, they received no guidance or materials to help them do so. In the words of one teacher, "the chaos created by the administration made me want to give up on teaching" (p. 23).

New Teachers and the Curriculum

One of the biggest challenges that new teachers face is simply determining what it is that they are going to *do* with students each day. Ideally, much of that work should be pre-planned and outlined by district curriculum guides and resources. However, new teachers experience with curriculum materials varies widely.

For example, Kauffman et al. (2002) found in their interviews of 40 first- and second-year teachers in Massachusetts that while some new teachers were handed scripted curriculum packages, most experienced *no* curriculum support. Sometimes teachers reported receiving just basic framework materials (like their state standards) from administration, which were inaccurately labeled as the course curricula. In this environment, creating materials from scratch became a priority of teachers' time and resources, and a general need for curriculum support for new teachers was became clear.

Carl (2014) investigated how new teachers interacted with scripted curriculum programs as they started their careers. Through interviews and surveys of 14 second-year Teach for America (TFA) teachers, Carl found new teachers needed support with learning how to interact with curriculum. Within these programs, Carl saw that new teachers demonstrated a range of practices with the materials. Some viewed the materials as oppressive and chose to abandon the district provided materials completely while others struggled to implement what was on paper with their actual students. Carl found that even when provided with scripted materials, new teachers need support in interpreting and implementing the resources given to them.

Even when new teachers are provided materials to work with, there is evidence to suggest that they are not adequately prepared to interpret and interact with curriculum resources. Handler's (2010) review of the curriculum of 20 colleges of education identifies a gap in teacher preparation related to curriculum design. While most programs feature course titles that reference curriculum in some capacity, her in-depth examination shows that actual course content may be misaligned, focusing instead on daily lesson planning or topics related to social justice. Handler concludes that most universities are likely not adequately preparing new teachers to understand theories and especially the methods of curriculum design, leaving them and their classrooms especially vulnerable if they do not inherit strong curriculum infrastructure to begin with.

This curriculum support deficit often follows new teachers into the field. Liu and Johnson (2006) describe challenges associated with trends in hiring new teachers. In a survey of 486 teachers across four states, Liu and Johnson found that the hiring process for many new teachers was a fast-paced experience that did not necessarily prepare teachers for the role they would be assuming. The researchers noted that in one state nearly 20% of new teachers were hired without an interview, while across all states nearly one-third of new teachers were hired by the central office without interaction with the building they would eventually work at. Most candidates did not receive opportunities to observe the school in operation. Most strikingly, in two states approximately one-third of new teachers were hired *after* the school year had already begun. Of those who experienced these information-reduced experiences, they reported that they received less accurate pictures of a variety of job-related topics, including their curriculum expectations and their teaching assignment.

This type of experience is often also related to the type of setting new teachers find employment in. Johnson et al. (2004) identify that a "support gap" exists between new teachers

onboarding and induction experiences in high- and low-income schools. In their survey of 374 K-12 public school teachers in Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan, they found significant discrepancies in teachers' experiences with hiring practices, mentoring, and curriculum support. According to their findings, "in low-income schools, 71 percent of second-year elementary school teachers report insufficient curricular guidance in social studies, 53 percent in science, 27 percent in language arts, and 20 percent in math" (p. 13). Interestingly, Johnson et al. attribute this lack of support to an over-reliance on *scripted* curriculum, with many teachers reporting an expectation to teach towards a standardized assessment. Johnson et al. also found that hiring practices in low-income schools were significantly less informative than those in affluent districts, noting that "almost one in five new teachers in low-income schools are hired without an interview" in Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan (p. 6).

Not only do many teachers find little to no curriculum training in their pre-service and onboarding experiences; this kind of curricular vacuum often continues throughout the length of teachers' careers. Blazar et al. (2019), studying teachers' fidelity to curriculum materials, found that most teachers experienced very little professional development on the topic of curriculum use. Focusing on the amount of training teachers received for their current curriculum materials, Blazar et al. found "the average teacher received just one day of training in the current year, and fewer than four days of their entire career" (p. 31).

The challenges facing new teachers are indeed multifarious as the demands of teaching vary significantly by assignment and by school context. Additionally, there is significant variance between teachers entering the field due to the differences in their own experience, their preservice academic programs, the quality of their training, and the differing requirements demanded by the states in which they serve. In such an environment, it becomes clear why many new teachers express feelings of a need for support. Without the necessary resources to give their

classrooms infrastructure, new teachers often find themselves building their classrooms from scratch. Simultaneously, without training or support to assist in accomplishing such a monumental task, many new teachers embark on that journey without confidence in what they are doing and without affirmations along the way. Ensuring that new teachers have access to high quality curriculum materials and training in how to use those resources may prove an effective strategy for supporting new teachers at the start of their careers.

New Teacher Induction: Curriculum as a Support

To mitigate the challenges facing new teachers, a significant amount of research has been dedicated to lifting up solutions for coping with the stress of the teaching profession. Within the body of research focused on new teacher support, topics range from best practice strategies for classroom management to developing strong pedagogical skills to finding a sense of belonging within a teaching community. One of the most critical times for new teachers is the transitional space between when they graduate from their college of education program to when they take the reins of control of their very first classroom. Because of this, there is a growing focus on developing high quality induction programs for new teachers to help support them as they begin their careers in new districts.

Research on new teacher induction focuses on developing multiple supports for new teachers, as opposed to focusing on any standalone strategy for new teacher retention. This multi-faceted approach to teacher support is often referred to as comprehensive induction. New teacher support programs that incorporate several development strategies have been shown to be generally more effective than any standalone support (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). In their report *Tapping the Potential*, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) defines comprehensive induction as "a combination of mentoring, professional development and support, and formal assessments for teachers during at least their first 2 years of teaching" (p. 2). Such programs are

often characterized by a combination of mentoring programs, purposeful efforts to lighten the teaching demands of new teachers, ongoing professional development, participating in an external network of teachers, administrator use of a standards-based evaluation system, and strong principal leadership (pp. 2-3). Most importantly, comprehensive induction programs of quality have been shown to cut new teacher attrition rates nearly in half (p. 2).

According to Wong (2005), a major voice in new teacher development research, induction programs work best as sustained, ongoing professional development that is focused on teaching and learning. Exemplary induction programs often include pre-service training focused on team building and instructional support, classroom management and instructional strategy development, and ongoing support beyond year one (Wong, 2005). Often, successful induction models begin with orientation and training specifically designed for new teachers prior to the start of the school year. Wong (2003), in profiling several successful induction models, noted that many included several days of new teacher training, sometimes reaching as many as four or five days (pp. 43-7). Training topics for these sessions are usually dedicated to school procedures, building expectations, course curriculum, and the practice of basic instructional strategies (pp. 43-7). Relevant to this study, Wong (2005) also argues that since few teachers begin their careers with access to standards-aligned curriculum, it is also imperative to create structured, intentional meeting times for new teachers to collaborate on instructional planning.

Similarly, in a survey of new teachers participating in induction models at five different districts, Public Education Network (2004) found that new teachers saw particular value in formal orientation that began before the start of the school year (pp. 28-9). During this onboarding phase, new teachers reported needing more information about the school system and how their building functioned (p. 28). Additionally, the Public Education Network compiled a new teacher resource "wish list" based on survey responses, which included items like a new

teacher handbook, a student handbook, references for discipline policies, the school's mission statement, copies of course standards, administration organizational charts, sample grade books, and lists of available curriculum resources (p. 30).

That new teachers voice a desire for site-based curriculum materials reflects the idiosyncratic status of curriculum across school contexts. Of paramount importance to the design of a quality induction program is a focus on acquiring the local knowledge required to work effectively in a particular school context (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). While there is consensus around many of the pillars of sound pedagogy, it is impossible for any college of education to prepare new teachers for the peculiarities of any given school setting. School cultures are equally as diverse as the students and adults who comprise them, each with their own set of values, shared vocabulary, adopted instructional model, policies and procedures, and traditions and histories. According to Feiman-Nemser (2001), induction programs should aid new teachers in "developing a professional identity," "creating a classroom learning community," developing a repertoire of impactful classroom strategies, and "designing responsive curriculum and instruction" (pp. 1028-30).

This perspective aligns with what Males et al. (2015) found in their multiple mixed-methods studies of preservice mathematics teachers curriculum development. Through observation and discourse, the researchers investigated preservice teachers' ability to engage with a particular teacher-curriculum interaction framework. The most relevant finding identified that preservice teachers were likely to notice "opportunities that aligned with their concepts about effective mathematics teaching", often choosing to write their own lesson plans based on their own expertise aside from any existing curriculum materials (p. 93). Because of this observation, Males et al. suggest that new teachers may benefit from specific development around *how* to use curriculum materials as they prepare to enter the field.

Effective induction programs are designed to pair new teachers with sustained access to both human and material supports. While this field of research most often centers on traditional structures like mentoring and professional development, there is frequent mention of curriculum as a topic of focus to be facilitated by these other methods. As the curriculum constitutes likely the most important infrastructure component of a teacher's classroom, it begs the question of whether an explicit focus on curriculum support, both materially and through training, ought to be considered its own pillar in the field of new teacher induction supports.

Chapter 2 Closure

The overarching framework of what constitutes curriculum in America's schools remains fragmented. The research record is not yet clear on what makes one curriculum program better than another, and the field is still refining what even comprises curriculum, tangibly. In recent years, political and environmental factors have contributed to curricular disharmony, requiring major, rapid shifts to the curricular status quo. While many teachers face challenges when curriculum resources are lacking and expectations are unclear, new teachers are some of the most vulnerable to the challenge induced by a missing curriculum. As outlined in Chapter 3, this study seeks to better understand the types of missing curriculum experiences new teachers have, how those experiences impacted their effectiveness in the classroom with students, and what curricular supports might better serve teachers as they enter the field of education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

As a mixed methods study, the goal of this research is to provide a more complete picture of the research problem by combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this case, the research problem in question is how (and how frequently) new teachers experience a missing curriculum. The four research questions investigate (1) the contextual frequency with which new teachers experience a missing curriculum, (2) the specific challenges that teachers ascribe to the experience of teaching with a missing curriculum, (3) the structural shortfalls in the onboarding process that contributed to the missing curriculum experience, and (4) how teachers explain the impact of their missing curriculum experience on their pedagogical development and their students' learning.

For the purposes of this study, a missing curriculum experience is generally described as a teaching career that begins in a context which does not have the supports of formal, written curriculum materials. Specific components that comprise this experience include (1) the lack of major instructional materials (e.g., a textbook, assessments, and/or lesson plans); (2) the lack of major organizational materials (e.g., a scope and sequence, alignment documentation, and/or a pacing guide); (3) the lack of clear expectations from administration about *what to teach*; and (4) the lack of appropriate training to use any materials that do exist.

This chapter details the methods of this two-stage mixed methods study that involves both a survey and follow-up interviews. The chapter begins by describing the phenomenological methodology used to frame this study and its intent. I then describe my own positionality in order to engage in researcher reflexivity, disclosing my personal connection to the research topic and intentionally bracketing my personal bias. Next, I discuss the research participants in detail,

followed by the research instruments. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the analytical procedures used in the study.

<p align="center">**Research Design, Approach, and Rationale**</p>

This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, which is a two-phase, non-experimental research method. In this design, the two phases occur *separately* and in sequential order: "the researcher collects quantitative data in the first phase, analyzes the results, and then uses the results to plan (or build on to) the second, qualitative phase" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 222). In this design, the results of the quantitative phase inform the purposeful selection of participants for the second phase, and the purpose of this approach "is to have the qualitative data help explain in more detail the initial quantitative results," thus providing a "more complete understanding of research problems and questions" (pp. 216, 222).

This study uses the two-part design in order to learn about participants' experiences regarding teaching with a *missing curriculum*. Phase one begins with a survey that serves multiple purposes. Designed to reach a larger audience than other qualitative methods (e.g., interviews), this survey attempted to cast a wide net in the educational community that was studied. The survey included screening questions in order to identify participants in the community who identify with having taught in a missing curriculum environment. By collecting demographic data, the survey provided some insight into the frequency of missing curriculum experiences as well as the particular contexts in which they are likely to occur. Participants also had the opportunity to describe their experience in their own words by responding to open-ended questions.

After surveys were collected, data analysis commenced, and five survey respondents who had experienced a missing curriculum environment and indicated willingness to be interviewed were invited to participate in phase two. In phase two, personal, in-depth interviews were

conducted in order to capture descriptions from teachers who identify with having shared that lived experience. Interviews were centered around the three research sub-questions, providing a narrative of participants' experiences with a *missing curriculum*, exploring the challenges they faced and learning about the impacts they perceived that the experience had on their pedagogy.

While employing a mixed-methods design, the qualitative and data analysis components of this study are rooted in constructivism and follow the traditions of phenomenological inquiry. Constructivist research "seeks to understand values, beliefs and meanings of social phenomena" and "aims to explore individuals' perceptions, share their meanings and develop insights about the observed case" (Hussain et al., 2013, p. 2375). In this case, my research is thematically focused on understanding the missing curriculum experience *as a phenomenon* and aims to describe it *as participants experienced* it. In phenomenological research, the basic goal is to describe the "universal essence" of a phenomenon by searching for common themes in the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon in question (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). At its core, phenomenology is "participant oriented," focusing exclusively on how the phenomenon is described by the participants (Alase, 2017, p. 11). Described by Alase (2017), phenomenology "allows for multiple individuals (participants) who experience similar events to tell their stories without any distortions and/or prosecutions" (p. 11). Phenomenology is both a descriptive and interpretive process, as the researcher aims to understand the phenomenon through the lens of participants *and* seeks to raise up themes that appear across multiple cases for further discussion (p. 11).

This study also embraces a spirit of pragmatism as the study is built to focus on the particular community I serve. Hussain et al. (2013) describe pragmatism as more an *approach* than a research paradigm, writing that pragmatists "sole purpose is to search answers that help inform their research questions" (p. 2380). While my overarching design follows

phenomenological *methods,* my interests go beyond the academic pursuits of this study: it is my hope that this work may have some local significance to the colleagues I work with and the students we work for.

Researcher Positionality

In phenomenological research, there is an acknowledgement of the need for researchers to separate their personal experiences from the research (Moustakas, 1994). Through engaging the "e*poche,"* it is important that researchers explore their "own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). While I have significant experience with the research questions being studied, I aim to mitigate the impact of my positionality through structured reflexivity. First, it is important that I disclose my own experiences and existing beliefs to the reader. Next, I included a "bracketing" phase at the beginning of each phase of analysis, tracked through memos in the data table (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). With these memos, I aimed to provide additional insight into my analytical process by documenting a chronological account of my reflections over time.

As this study's author, it is important to acknowledge that I identify with having shared in the missing curriculum experience and therefore have my own feelings and beliefs about the phenomenon in question. These feelings comprise a general frustration with the challenges I experienced as a new teacher perceiving a lack of support. I hold a belief that, had I received curriculum guidance, I could have improved my skills much more quickly, and therefore had a more positive impact on children. After my experiences of teaching in three different public schools, I shifted my professional focus from directly supporting students to supporting the adults in education who work on their behalf. Now, I serve as a district-level administrator

whose duties include teacher and curriculum supervision, instructional coaching, and the implementation of new teacher induction programming.

While my missing curriculum experiences and the duties of my professional role position me directly within the topic of study, it is my hope that these experiences will give me nuanced understanding of the research questions under investigation, ultimately informing the research design and the data analysis process. In particular, I believe that my experiences have helped to identify both that the phenomenon exists in the field and its underrepresentation in the literature. Similarly, my experience with district curriculum initiatives helped to define the parameters of the missing curriculum phenomenon and my experience with induction programming helped frame this study within that context.

Population, Sample, and Setting

Participants

This study focuses on a particular subset of teachers who met specific criteria relevant to the research questions, and the participant selection process for this study followed a purposeful, criterion-based selection model applied to a convenient sample. In order to have been targeted for the initial survey, recipients must (1) be employed by a public (traditional or charter) school, (2) must teach at the secondary level, and (3) teach primarily in one of the four core disciplines (ELA, Math, Science, or Social Studies). While much curriculum research focuses in on a single discipline for the sake of generalizability (e.g. 'high school mathematics teachers'), it was important to me to use the status of 'core content teacher' as the overarching criteria for inclusion in this study for two reasons: (1) the construct of the missing curriculum phenomenon transcends academic discipline and (2) this study aims to describe the personal challenges faced by *teachers in general* in the *absence* of curriculum materials, rather than to test the impact of a particular subject's curriculum on student achievement.

The target population for survey distribution included all teachers who met these criteria within a particular county in a Midwestern state where I currently work and reside. This county was selected for several reasons. First, this county is quite diverse. Home to a medium-sized city and its suburbs, the county features a variety of urban, suburban, and rural schools. Racially and economically diverse as well, the county is home to schools that consistently score above 90th percentile nationwide as well as schools that fall under the 10th percentile. There are 76 public middle and high schools in the area identified for survey distribution, serving over 40,000 students. In order to be included in the study, each school needed to serve grades 7-12 and provide a general education to a general population; alternative schools, adaptive programs, and schools for adjudicated youth were not included. While limited to a single geographic region, my hope is that the local diversity will provide the opportunity to look for missing curriculum trends across a variety of educational contexts.

Second, there are specific benefits to studying the community I work in. Having formal knowledge of the schools within the county helped me more accurately constrain survey distribution to ensure fidelity to participant criteria. Additionally, while the target population may not quite represent a convenience sample, I was able to request the support of local colleagues to help drive survey responses by advertising on their own campuses and through their own professional networks as well as by providing me with their most accurate staff lists. More importantly, as a practicing school administrator, the results of this study in my local setting is of professional interest to me beyond the scope of this project. Understanding the curricular landscape of the community I serve may support policy discussions in my state, my county, and within the school that I work for.

Once the survey was completed and the initial data analyzed, five respondents were identified for follow-up, in-depth interviews. The last section of the survey also provided an

opportunity for interested respondents to note their willingness to be interviewed. From amongst those who indicated such willingness, interview participants were prioritized based on (1) how recently they experienced a missing curriculum and (2) the severity of their missing curriculum experience.

Several factors influenced my rationale for pursuing an interview design limited to five participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) cite a sample size of ranging between 5 and 25 as appropriate for phenomenological research (p. 79). As my first formal study, it was also important that the design of this study was limited in scope. Since participants must be recruited *and* studied within a limited time frame, accessibility to participants was of a high priority, and thus I chose to work with a smaller candidate pool.

Recruitment Process and Informed Consent

The first phase of this study distributed a web-based survey to pre-identified potential participants (Appendix A). In order to perform human subjects research, I first secured HSIRB approval from Western Michigan University in the Spring of 2023 (Appendix B). Informed consent occurred at each stage of the study, first with an approved cover page for the survey and also with a full discussion of consent materials for interview participants. After HSIRB approval, I used publicly available information to source the emails of all staff who met the study criteria at each of the 76 middle and high schools in the county. An email (Appendix C) was sent to each identifiable teacher from my Western Michigan University email account with a link to the survey included. Two reminder emails were also sent (Appendix D) to all possible participants to prompt a response from those who did not initially respond or who did not fully complete the survey. While email addresses were used to distribute the survey, the survey itself did not automatically collect respondent emails unless the respondent chose to be considered for a follow-up interview and offered their email address as a contact. In order to encourage

participation, I also announced the opportunity to participate in the study to area curriculum directors at our regional monthly meeting (Appendix E).

During the completion of the initial survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a one-hour follow-up interview. If willing, participants voluntarily attached their contact information to their data so that they could be reached for interview scheduling. Participant willingness to participate was cross-referenced against the interview criteria in order to create a final sample of five interview participants. Once interview participants were identified, they were invited to participate in the follow-up interviews by a final recruitment email (Appendix F). Additional informed consent conversations and the eventual interviews were then scheduled through direct email correspondence with the participant.

Researcher-Participant Relationship and Potential Risks

While risks for participants did exist, I aimed to minimize those risks through the study's design and the design of the recruitment process. The primary risk associated with this study was that study participants may have had existing relationships with me, the researcher, or I may have had professional relationships with their supervisors. This had potential to create added pressure for teachers to participate and it had the potential to contribute to a belief that participation (or lack thereof) could have real consequences for participants' daily work. For these reasons, I separated the recruitment process from my formal role, using university communication tools exclusively and limiting correspondence about the study to outside of work hours.

This research topic also presented the opportunity for sensitive data to be exposed about past work experiences, which, if made public, could have real, negative impact on a teacher's reputation in the educational community, potentially jeopardizing relationships with past and

future employers. Several data handling measures were enacted to minimize this risk. First, as interview data was collected, it was immediately de-identified and schools that were explicitly mentioned were redacted and replaced by contextual descriptions. Second, all records were quickly transferred to secure cloud storage provided by Western Michigan University that was password protected and only accessible by the researcher, separated from any school's purview and therefore not subject to FOIA requests.

While there were no direct benefits to study participants, there is potential for their data to contribute to the limited body of research focused on new teachers' curriculum experiences. This study could help guide districts in the development of induction practices that support future teachers by explicitly focusing on curriculum supports. Participation in this study could also support teachers in the realization that their lived experience is shared with others in the field, providing opportunity for more academic dialogue around the particular phenomenon of a *missing curriculum* lived by some new teachers.

Procedures

Instrumentation

As a mixed-methods study, this research project used both quantitative and qualitative research instruments. In phase one, data collection began with a survey which yielded preliminary data and simultaneously served as a recruitment tool, identifying participants for phase two. Phase two featured semi-structured interviews supported by an interview protocol. The two instruments used in this study are described below.

County-wide Curriculum Survey

The initial data collection tool for this study was a survey (Appendix A) administered to secondary educators across a particular county in a mid-western state. The survey was a new design, built by the researcher for the purposes of this study using Qualtrics survey software. The

survey consisted of 18 possible response items aligned to the four research questions. Survey items were based on information gathered in the literature review, the researcher's professional experience, and feedback received from the dissertation committee.

The survey was built into four sections: (1) informed consent and purpose of study, (2) demographic information and participant criteria, (3) extended response questions about participants' missing curriculum experience, and (4) an invitation to participate in follow-up interviews. The survey included internal features that screened participants, administering survey questions only to those participants who meet participation criteria based on their responses in section two. Table 1indicates the alignment of survey items to the four research sub questions.

Table 1

Survey Crosswalk Table

Research Questions	Survey Items	Data Analysis
1) To what extent do teachers experience a missing curriculum in their first year of teaching?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18	Descriptive Statistics
2) What are the specific challenges that teachers ascribe to the experience of teaching without curriculum support?	17	Descriptive Statistics / Thematic Coding
3) What structural shortfalls in the onboarding process, if any, contributed to the missing curriculum experience?	10, 12, 13	Descriptive Statistics
4) How do teachers explain the impact of the missing curriculum experience on their pedagogical development and, ultimately, student learning?	17	Descriptive Statistics / Thematic Coding

A power analysis was calculated to determine the statistical significance of the sample size. First, the total population of employed middle and high school educators in this particular

county is estimated to be approximately 1,800, using MiSchoolData, a publicly available

database that lists staffing counts by category for public schools in the state. Despite having

access to this data set, the population still needed significant approximation because staffing

numbers did not break down teachers by subject area, nor did they differentiate between in-

person staff and outsourced teachers of record for online courses offered by districts. With a final

sample of 134 teachers meeting the inclusion criteria and completing the survey, the final data

set is estimated to hold a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 8%.

Interview Protocol

In qualitative research, the *researcher* usually serves as the primary instrument for data

collection, as the researcher typically observes, records, and interprets the data to be studied

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As is common in phenomenological research, this study also used in-

depth interviews as a form of data collection with select participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.

79). Following recommendations from Alase (2017) about an Interpretative Phenomenological

Analysis (IPA) interview structure, interviews were semi-structured and limited to one per

participant (p. 15). Interviews featured open-ended questions and lasted approximately 60

minutes. Because of the personal nature of the IPA approach, interviews were scheduled at times

selected by the participants (p. 15). All interviews were conducted virtually due to the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, a semi-structured interview protocol provided a similar

experience to each participant, increasing the reliability of the protocol, and also limiting my

ability to influence the path of the interview questioning *in-the-moment*.

The semi-structured interview protocol used for this study (Appendix G) was designed to

provide some standardized questions to help ground the interview within the experience of the

phenomenon as well as open-ended questions to allow for exploration and elaboration (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). The protocol design was pilot tested through a practicum project of

similar intent approved by a class IRB in 2021. Each of the 15 interview questions are grounded in the research questions of this study and seek to explore how teachers define their experience with no curriculum, the challenges they faced that year, their characterization of the curriculum environment of that school, and the perceived impact on their teaching practices that they attribute to that experience.

After exploring the nature of the lived experience, questions transition to a *solution-seeking* design, encouraging participants to reflect on their experiences and suggest *what might have helped* support their specific curricular challenges. While this line of questioning does stray from the *lived experience* of participants, I found it important to explore whether or not participants shared a common vision for *solutions* to the challenge presented by 'missing curriculum,' too. Additionally, exploring potential solutions from teachers' perspectives supports the pragmatic intent of improving district programs put forth by this study.

Data Collection Procedures

This study occurred in two stages, beginning with a survey to a broad applicant pool and concluding with a much more limited interview protocol. Since the participant selection and data analysis processes of the second stage were dependent on the results of the first stage, it was important that this study was designed in a linear fashion. The data collection procedures for this study were as follows:

1. Submit research proposal to Western Michigan University HSIRB and secure approval for human subjects research.
2. Create secure storage space for research materials within WMU cloud storage
3. Compile a spreadsheet of the email addresses of all participants who meet survey criteria using publicly available contact information from the websites of the 42 area high schools who meet study criteria.

4. Distribute the survey with included consent materials (appendix A, appendix C).

5. Recruit using the participation script (appendix E) at an area curriculum director's meeting.

6. Send the reminder emails (appendix D) to the original list of participants.

7. Compile and code survey data using data analysis procedures.

8. Identify participants for follow-up interviews from the survey data based on interview criteria.

9. Send interview invitation email (appendix F) to qualifying participants.

10. Correspond with participants to review informed consent materials and schedule interviews.

11. Conduct interviews according to interview protocols (appendix G).

12. Compile and code interview data using data analysis procedures.

Recording and Data Transformation

Audio recordings were used to capture the data from the semi-structured interviews. Recordings were made using a WebEx account provided by Western Michigan University, which was be used to help generate transcripts. Once transcripts were created, identifiable data was redacted so as to protect participants' identities. As data was chunked and coded, transcript text was converted and stored in a digital spreadsheet in order to provide a visual representation of the data set. Once all of the transcripts were initially coded, this spreadsheet served as the primary vehicle for data analysis. All data was stored in private, secure cloud storage provided by Western Michigan University.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

</div>

Data analysis began with the initial survey results. I first processed demographic data to better understand contextual trends related to the missing curriculum phenomenon within the

community studied. For example, it was important to learn how many of the total respondents met the criteria for having lived a missing curriculum experience. It also created opportunity to infer some trends about school settings where curriculum gaps are likely to occur from the initial data set. Frequency and descriptive statistics were computed and analyzed for all multiple choice and Likert-scale questions. Thematic coding of the free-response questions began once the survey was closed and was used to develop initial categories for the data set. These initial findings were used to make intentional adjustments to the flow of the interview protocol before future interviews began.

Data analysis for the qualitative phase of this study followed the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In IPA, researchers move through a cyclical process that begins with reading the data set, generating codes and developing themes, searching for patterns across themes, and then searching for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82-101). Within this process, the researcher intentionally loops back through each stage multiple times as new data is incorporated into the existing framework (p. 100).

Once interviews begin, data analysis occurred after the collection of *each* interview and several purposeful readings of the resulting interview transcript, following IPA data analysis protocols (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). The main intent of these readings was to "ensure that the participant becomes the focus of the analysis" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). While completing the initial reads, intentional "noting" or memoing took place, focusing on what Smith et al. (2009) describe as "descriptive comments" and "conceptual comments" (pp. 83-89). These notes were used to construct rich, thick participant narratives to characterize each interview participant and their particular missing curriculum story.

Each transcript was then chunked into units using in vivo coding for the purpose of developing themes (Smith et al. 2009, pp. 91-92). In phenomenological inquiry, it is important

that findings rest solely on the lived experience of participants, and *not* on the experience of the researcher. For this reason, in vivo coding was used and codes were developed from the data rather than *a priori*. Data codes were grouped by meaning and arranged visually in a searchable spreadsheet to contribute to pattern analysis. These codes were reviewed and revised systematically. Coding categories that emerged from the analysis were used to develop broader themes, and themes were also cross-referenced across participant narratives. Categories were grouped in a hierarchical structure leading towards a central, overarching theme based on their frequency across participants and the similarities in the stories they told. As each new interview was conducted, the entire process occurred again alongside an intentional review of existing codes in order to discover patterns and align findings (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 100-105).

Once thematic inquiry was exhausted within the existing data set, a framework (Figure 5) was generated to interpret and explain the essence of participants' experiences with the missing curriculum phenomenon. Data gathered by the solution-seeking questions was coded separately from the phenomenological experience and was used to support the discussion and recommendations sections of this study. Additionally, in order to keep the eventual findings grounded in the words of participants, thematic discussion in the findings is supported with direct quotes from participants. To determine the relevancy of specific themes to the research questions, frequency across interviews served as the primary calibrating data measure.

Chapter 3 Closure

Grounded in the framework of phenomenology, this two-stage study was designed to provide a rich data set about teachers' experiences starting their careers with a missing curriculum. The study began with a survey administered to all secondary educators in a particular community, providing an initial data set for thematic coding while also serving as an identification method for finding qualified participants for follow-up interviews. The resulting

interviews were intended to provide a deeper narrative of participants' experiences, allowing the opportunity for the research findings to be presented in the words of the participants themselves. Ultimately, the goal of the researcher was to embrace a constructivist approach in an attempt to define a missing curriculum experience for the research community while also maintaining an ethos of pragmatism in order to support and understand his local educational community. The findings from these procedures are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This study explored the phenomenon of beginning a teaching career with little or no curriculum support. Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this study began with a survey to explore the frequency and magnitude of these missing curriculum experiences. In phase two of the study, a select sub-set of interview participants were interviewed to better understand the conditions of these experiences and their impact on the teachers themselves as well as their students.

This chapter is divided into two major sections. The first section focuses on phase one of the study, providing an analysis of the quantitative data produced by the survey. It begins with an in-depth description of the final sample of participants and then shares their responses in relation to the four criteria of the missing curriculum experience: (1) the lack of instructional materials; (2) the lack of organizational materials; (3) the lack of clear expectations; and (4) the lack of appropriate training.

Section two reviews the qualitative data gathered by the study. The section begins with a summary of the qualitative data yielded from the final question of the survey, which is presented as a more generalized entry point to the content of the interviews. The section continues into the second phase of the study by presenting participant profiles of each of the five interview participants, describing their experiences in their own terms. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the major themes that were derived from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the coded interview data.

Phase One: Quantitative Data

In phase one of this study, a survey was distributed to all identifiable secondary education teachers (grades 7-12) in a particular county of a Midwestern state. The survey was designed to

explore research question one: *to what extent do teachers experience a missing curriculum in their first year of teaching?* The survey collected demographic information first, focusing primarily on identifying (1) the experience level of the teacher, (2) the subject area they primarily taught, and (3) the context in which they taught. The survey then sought to understand the range of curriculum experiences that new teachers encounter when they begin their careers, using Likert-scale matrix tables to assess the four missing curriculum criteria.

The Final Sample

The target sample included teachers from 76 total middle and high schools in a single county, including both traditional public schools as well as public school academies. Of these schools, 66 had identifiable staff lists and were therefore included in the sample. The remaining 10 were all part of a single charter school network that did not display staff information in any public way; after multiple attempts to contact administrators for survey distribution, these schools were omitted from the sample. A total of 1,640 valid emails were discovered to receive the survey, and 227 survey recipients completed the survey during the summer of 2023; 134 of the 227 survey respondents were eligible for inclusion in the final data set (n=134), and this comprised the final sample. An unpredicted, large amount of respondents (n=93) were disqualified because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. While they were currently employed in the target setting, these respondents either began their careers out-of-state (n=53), began their careers in private schools (n=10), taught primarily outside of the four target subjects in their first year of teaching (n=13), or did not fully complete the survey (n=17).

Demographic Information

The teachers who responded to the survey represented a diverse range of total teaching experience, subject area(s) taught, and school context, represented by Table 2. The year in which teachers experienced their first year of professional teaching spanned decades, ranging from

1988-2022. The median first year was 2009 and the most common year of start was 2018 (n=9). The majority of respondents had 20 or more years of experience (n=36; 26.9%) while the next largest group had five years of experience or less (n=33; 24.6%). The respondents were fairly evenly distributed across the four main subject areas with 21.6% teaching Math, 20.1% teaching English Language Arts, 19.4% teaching Science, 16.4% teaching Social Studies, and the remaining 22.5% teaching a combination of multiple subject areas. 66.4% of these teachers taught at the high school level while 33.6% taught middle school grades.

There was also a range of school contexts represented in the survey data. The majority of respondents served in traditional public schools (n=113; 84.3%) whereas a significantly smaller portion served in charter schools (n=21; 15.7%). Most teachers worked in suburban (n=58; 43.4%) or urban (n=54; 40.3%) settings, which generally reflects the demographics of the county surveyed. Schools ranged in size from serving 500 students or less (n=38; 28.4%), serving 501-1,000 students (n=68; 50.7%), or serving over 1,000 students (n=28; 20.9%). Regardless of setting, most respondents worked in schools that received Title I funds for at-risk students (n=81; 60.4%).

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Demographic Label	Sample *n* (%)
Total Respondents	134 (100)
Years of Experience	
1-5	33 (24.6)
6-10	20 (14.9)
11-15	22 (16.4)
16-20	21 (15.7)
20+	36 (26.9)
Subject	
English	27 (20.1)
Math	29 (21.6)
Science	26 (19.4)
Social Studies	22 (16.4)
Multiple	30 (22.5)
Grade Level	
Middle School	45 (33.6)
High School	89 (66.4)
School Type	
Traditional Public	113 (84.3)
Charter School	21 (15.7)
School Setting	
Rural	22 (16.4)
Suburban	58 (43.3)
Urban	54 (40.3)
School Size	
500 or less	38 (28.4)
501 – 1000	68 (50.7)
1000+	28 (20.9)
Title I	
Yes	81 (60.4)
No	24 (17.9)
Unsure	29 (21.6)

Note: Years of experience percentages do not equal 100% because two participants chose not to respond to that question

Instructional Materials

In relation to the missing curriculum experience, the first questions the survey

investigated were related to the type, quantity, and quality of instructional materials received by

new teachers in the county. Respondents were asked to rate a series of statements about the

resources they may or may not have received using a 6-point Likert scale, where a ranking of 1

equaled "not at all true" and 6 equaled "completely true." Table 3 shows the frequency and

percentage of participant responses related to the type of materials they received, and Table 4

shows their perception of the quality of those resources.

Table 3

Type of Instructional Materials

Regarding curriculum materials, my district provided me with…	1 *n* (%)	2 *n* (%)	3 *n* (%)	4 *n* (%)	5 *n* (%)	6 *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
Assessments	35 (26.1)	29 (21.6)	20 (14.9)	18 (13.4)	16 (11.9)	16 (11.9)	134 (100)
Instructional resources	12 (8.9)	19 (14.2)	22 (16.4)	24 (17.9)	32 (23.9)	25 (18.7)	134 (100)
Planning documents	34 (27.0)	28 (22.2)	19 (15.1)	20 (15.9)	15 (11.9)	10 (7.9)	126 (100)
Standards documentation	27 (21.1)	22 (17.2)	25 (19.5)	19 (14.8)	21 (16.4)	14 (10.9)	128 (100)
Adequate resources for all students	9 (6.9)	16 (12.3)	25 (19.2)	19 (14.6)	32 (24.6)	29 (22.3)	130 (100)

Note: 1= not true at all; 6=completely true

What is immediately clear by examining the data set is that there is wide variability in the

type of materials teachers have received when beginning their careers. While it appears that

some teachers across the county are receiving comprehensive materials, others are receiving

nothing at all to help support their classroom. Each item type has at least one-third of teachers

responding negatively with ratings between 1 and 3, and regarding assessments, planning

documents, and standards documentation, this number rises to over half of all participants.

Teachers reported receiving the fewest resources related to planning documents and assessments,

with 27% and 26.1% respectively reporting that they received no resources in these categories

whatsoever. Instructional resources were distributed more favorably with a mean score of 3.9,

suggesting the average experience had at least some material support in this area. Teachers

reported receiving more student resources than any other resource type with 22.3% reporting

comprehensive materials; however, 38.4% still reported significant gaps in available student

resources with 6.9% reporting having access to no student materials at all.

Table 4

Quality of Instructional Materials

Regarding curriculum materials, I feel like my district provided me with…	1 n (%)	2 n (%)	3 n (%)	4 n (%)	5 n (%)	6 n (%)	Total n (%)
High quality materials	22 (16.8)	24 (18.3)	26 (19.8)	29 (22.1)	18 (13.7)	12 (9.2)	131 (100)
Easy to understand materials	22 (16.9)	25 (19.2)	21 (16.2)	28 (21.5)	19 (14.6)	15 (11.5)	130 (100)
Easy to implement materials	23 (17.7)	27 (20.8)	19 (14.6)	31 (23.8)	16 (12.3)	14 (10.8)	130 (100)
All materials needed to teach my course	35 (26.3)	24 (18.0)	24 (18.0)	21 (15.8)	16 (12.0)	13 (9.8)	133 (100)

Note: 1= not true at all; 6=completely true

Examining Table 4, most teachers rejected all four statements related to the quality and

depth of the materials they received to some degree. In relation to high quality curriculum

materials, approximately 55% of respondents replied with ratings between 1 and 3, underscoring

teachers' perceptions of receiving low quality materials in their first year of teaching. Similar

percentages are observed in relation to the materials' ease of use, with 52% of teachers at least

somewhat rejecting that their materials were easy to understand and 53% at least somewhat

rejecting that they were easy to implement. Most strikingly, 26.3% of teachers completely

rejected the idea that they received all of the materials necessary to teach the course they were charged to teach in their first year of public education.

Expectations and Support

Regarding the clarity of curriculum expectations received and level of curriculum support experienced, teachers held varying opinions (see Table 5). Generally speaking, teachers held unfavorable opinions of curriculum support from administrators, with over 71% at least somewhat rejecting that they received clear expectations from administration and over 30% completely rejecting the notion that their administrators were competent to give advice in relation to their subject area. Perhaps most despairing, 55% of teachers at least partially rejected the statement that their district even cared about what they taught in their classrooms.

While teachers generally did not report receiving structured support from district assigned mentors, most teachers did have strong feelings about the level of curriculum support they received from their colleagues. Over 43% completely identified with the statement that they had close colleagues who they could ask curriculum-related questions, the strongest response to any item included in the survey. Over 30% also stated that it was completely true that they regularly co-planned with colleagues. Such strong statements in relation to these survey items positions colleagues as a meaningful and necessary support to new teachers when other material and systemic supports are not present.

Overall, teachers reported a variety of experiences in relation to curriculum support, suggesting an inconsistent curricular landscape across schools in the county. While some felt secure in their roles with ongoing curriculum support, others experienced no support at all and were completely unsure of what to teach. Such uneven experiences exposes new teachers to varying levels of success and failure as they begin their careers.

Table 5

Expectations and Support

Regarding the support I received from administration and colleagues, I feel like…	1 *n* (%)	2 *n* (%)	3 *n* (%)	4 *n* (%)	5 *n* (%)	6 *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
I received clear expectations from administrators.	26 (20.3)	37 (28.9)	28 (21.9)	10 (7.8)	14 (10.9)	13 (10.2)	128 (100)
My administrators were competent in my subject area.	39 (30.2)	28 (21.7)	23 (17.8)	15 (11.6)	11 (8.5)	13 (10.1)	129 (100)
My district cared about what I was teaching and was invested in my classroom.	15 (12.0)	24 (19.2)	30 (24.0)	21 (16.8)	18 (14.4)	17 (13.6)	125 (100)
District mentors provided regular guidance on what I was teaching	30 (23.4)	20 (15.6)	20 (15.6)	16 (12.5)	21 (16.4)	21 (16.4)	128 (100)
If I had a question regarding my curriculum, I had colleagues who were ready and willing to support me.	6 (4.6)	14 (10.9)	14 (10.9)	20 (15.6)	18 (14.1)	56 (43.8)	128 (100)
My colleagues and I worked together to make decisions about what to teach.	20 (15.9)	18 (14.3)	13 (10.3)	16 (12.7)	21 (16.7)	38 (30.2)	126 (100)
I had consistent and ongoing curricular support.	20 (15.6)	27 (21.1)	22 (17.2)	26 (20.3)	19 (14.8)	14 (10.9)	128 (100)
I was confident about what to teach and what to do next.	15 (11.6)	25 (19.4)	22 (17.1)	21 (16.3)	26 (20.2)	20 (15.5)	129 (100)

Note: 1= not true at all; 6=completely true

Training and Onboarding

In addition to the type and quality of curriculum resources received, it is also important that teachers are trained to use the materials available to them. Table 6 shows how teachers responded to questions related to the curriculum training they received and their general onboarding experience before the start of the new school year. Teachers overwhelmingly

rejected the notion that they received training in relation to the school's curriculum materials with over 80% responding with ratings between 1 and 3 on the Likert scale, and 36.5% stated they did not receive any training at all. These responses were mirrored in regards to training for digital curriculum materials. Only 4.8% of teachers said it was completely true that they were shown what materials were available while 17.5% said it was not true at all.

Table 6

Training and Onboarding

Before I started teaching, my district made sure…	1 *n* (%)	2 *n* (%)	3 *n* (%)	4 *n* (%)	5 *n* (%)	6 *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
I received training on how to use existing curriculum materials.	46 (36.5)	41 (32.5)	16 (12.7)	11 (8.7)	9 (7.1)	3 (2.4)	126 (100)
I was shown what resources were available and how to access them.	22 (17.5)	47 (37.3)	25 (19.8)	11 (8.7)	15 (11.9)	6 (4.8)	126 (100)
I received training on how to use digital resources associated with my course.	49 (39.8)	30 (24.4)	19 (15.4)	10 (8.1)	12 (9.8)	3 (2.4)	123 (100)
I was connected to colleagues who could support me.	15 (12.0)	13 (10.4)	26 (20.8)	17 (13.6)	24 (19.2)	31 (24.8)	125 (100)
I had opportunities to connect with teachers who had previously taught the course.	25 (20.0)	23 (18.4)	17 (13.6)	14 (11.2)	19 (15.2)	27 (21.6)	125 (100)
I was prepared to start the school year because of the training I received.	36 (28.6)	26 (20.6)	27 (21.4)	17 (13.5)	16 (12.7)	4 (3.2)	126 (100)

Note: 1= not true at all; 6=completely true

In relation to teachers' onboarding experiences, varied and inconsistent experiences are once again observed. While some teachers felt strongly connected to supportive colleagues (24.8%), others did not at all (12%), and, while some had quality hand-off experiences with the

previous teacher (21.6%), roughly the same amount had no such experience (20.0%). With these varied levels of curriculum support, only 3.2% of teachers could say it was completely true that they felt prepared to start the year because of the training they received, while 28.6% stated that it was not at all true.

Impact on Teachers

These data suggest that the curriculum experience of new teachers is indeed inconsistent from one experience to another, with varied levels of material support, personal support, training, and/or expectations. Because of the challenges associated with such limited support, teachers reported investing significant amounts of personal time to material creation, with 32.3% (n=41) reporting that they spent over 10 hours per week creating curriculum materials from scratch (see Figure 1 below). Similarly, Figure 2 showcases the high frequency with which teachers reported spending their own money to supplement any curriculum materials supplied by the district, with most teachers reporting that occurred often (n=39; 30.5%).

Figure 2

Hours Per Week Spent Creating Curriculum Materials
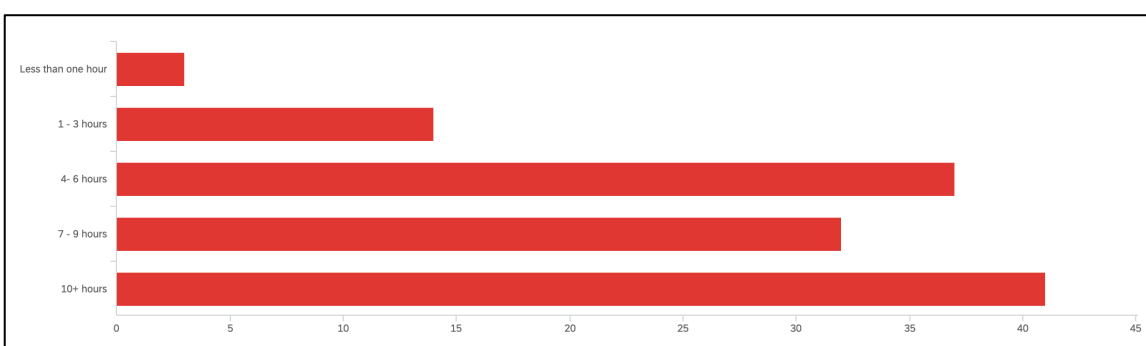
n=127

Figure 3

How Often Teachers Spent Personal Funds on Curriculum
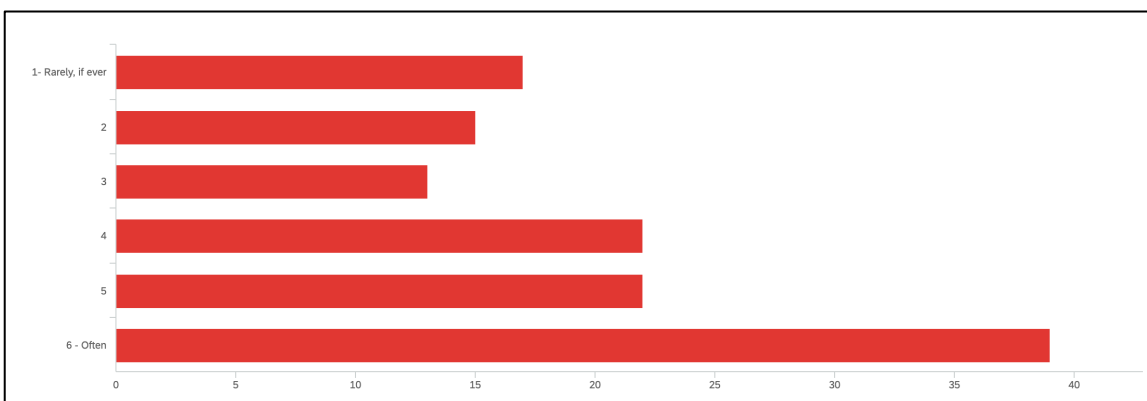
n=128

The Missing Curriculum

This survey aimed to shed light on the frequency and degree to which new teachers experienced a missing curriculum in their first public school teaching assignment. While the level and type of supports teachers did or did not receive varied significantly, it is the combination of missing supports that forms a full missing curriculum experience. In one of the final survey questions, teachers were asked to reflect on the level of support they received overall, and it is here that the general experience of new teachers can be gauged. To this question, over 70% of teachers responded with a unfavorable perception of the curriculum support they received. In total, only 6 teachers reported having lots of curriculum support (4.7%), whereas 28 (21.9%) reported receiving little to no support at all (see Figure 4).

It is these teachers who responded with the negative extreme of having little to no support overall that this study identified as having experienced a missing curriculum during their initial year of teaching. This pool of 28 teachers comprises the subset from which participants were recruited for follow-up interviews to better learn about the missing curriculum experiences that they had and the impact those experiences had on them during their developmental years as

teachers. Table 7 provides a demographic comparison between the teachers who experienced a missing curriculum and the overall survey sample.

Figure 4

How Much Curriculum Support Teachers Received
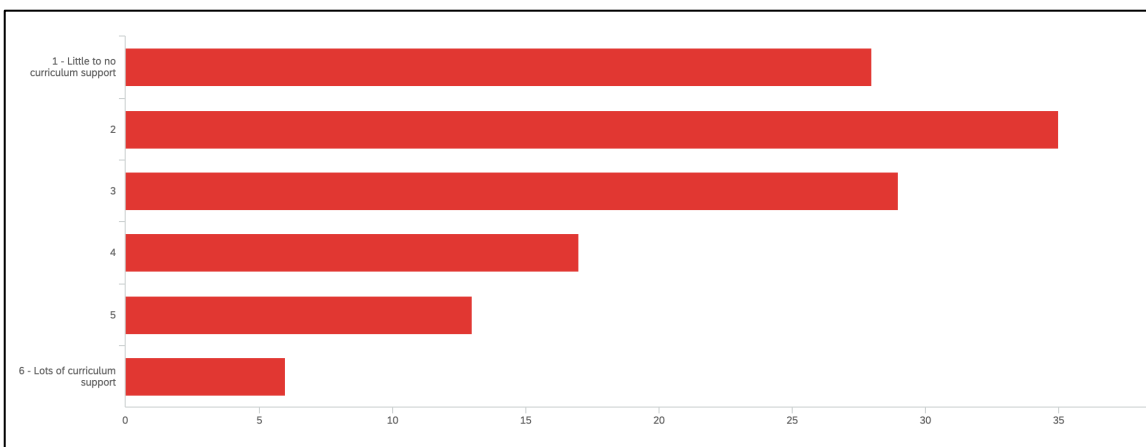
n=128

Comparing the missing curriculum subset with the original sample yields some important trends that may merit further investigation. Most notably, teachers who identified as having a missing curriculum experience appear to have more experience and therefore had their missing curriculum experience many years ago. 39% of teachers in the missing curriculum subset had 20 or more years of experience, and zero teachers with less than five years of experience identified as having a complete lack of curriculum support. Of those who identified as having no curriculum support at all, the most recent year of entry into the field of education was 2017. That being said, seven teachers five years of experience or less rated their general level of curriculum support as "2," the second lowest rating, constituting 21.2% of that demographic.

Table 7

Participant Demographics Compared to Missing Curriculum Demographics

Demographic Label	Sample n (%)	Missing Curriculum n (%)
Total Respondents	134 (100)	28 (100)
Years of Experience		
1-5	33 (24.6)	0 (0.0)
6-10	20 (14.9)	5 (17.9)
11-15	22 (16.4)	6 (21.4)
16-20	21 (15.7)	6 (21.4)
20+	36 (26.9)	11 (39.3)
Subject		
English	27 (20.1)	5 (17.9)
Math	29 (21.6)	3 (10.7)
Science	26 (19.4)	7 (25.0)
Social Studies	22 (16.4)	8 (28.6)
Multiple	30 (22.5)	5 (17.9)
Grade Level		
Middle School	45 (33.6)	8 (28.6)
High School	89 (66.4)	20 (71.4)
School Type		
Traditional Public	113 (84.3)	22 (78.6)
Charter School	21 (15.7)	6 (21.4)
School Setting		
Rural	22 (16.4)	7 (25.0)
Suburban	58 (43.3)	8 (28.6)
Urban	54 (40.3)	13 (46.4)
School Size		
500 or less	38 (28.4)	12 (42.9)
501 – 1000	68 (50.7)	11 (39.3)
1000+	28 (20.9)	5 (17.9)
Title I		
Yes	81 (60.4)	16 (57.1)
No	24 (17.9)	5 (17.9)
Unsure	29 (21.6)	7 (25.0)

In order to examine this finding more closely, I re-examined teachers' ratings of their general level of curriculum support based on the date of their first year of teaching. This data is portrayed by Table 8, with a rating of "1" indicating "little to no support" and a rating of "6" indicating "lots of curriculum support". In this view, it appears that teachers' perceptions of

curriculum support held relatively stable through the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. However, complete missing curriculum experiences (ratings of "1") were not observed in the 2020-present range, while instances of comprehensive support were observed. Most notably, the 2020-present category is the only time period where respondents ratings of curriculum support were generally more positive than negative. Given the tumultuous education environment throughout these years, which include the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this finding was certainly not predicted. More data will be necessary to see if this trend holds true over time, and, if so, what factors are contributing to more favorable perceptions of curriculum support by first-year teachers.

Table 8

Level of Curriculum Support by Decade of First Employment

First Year of Teaching	1 *n* (%)	2 *n* (%)	3 *n* (%)	4 *n* (%)	5 *n* (%)	6 *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
1980-89	1 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (25.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (100)
1990-99	8 (28.6)	4 (14.3)	6 (21.4)	4 (14.3)	5 (17.9)	0 (0.0)	28 (100)
2000-2009	9 (23.7)	8 (21.1)	10 (26.3)	3 (7.9)	2 (5.3)	3 (7.9)	38 (100)
2010-2019	9 (18.4)	17 (34.7)	10 (20.4)	5 (10.2)	4 (8.2)	0 (0.0)	49 (100)
2020-Present	0 (0.0)	3 (20.0)	3 (20.0)	4 (26.7)	2 (13.4)	3 (20.0)	15 (100)

Note: Some rows do not equal the total column because not all participants responded to this question.

Most other factors seemed to hold somewhat consistent in relation to the rate at which missing curriculum experiences were observed in comparison to the rate of representation in the survey sample. Missing curriculum experiences occurred at Title I schools at similar rates to which the original sample was represented. Charter schools, rural schools, urban schools, and

small schools serving 500 students or less are slightly overrepresented in missing curriculum experiences with greater than 5% difference from their frequency in the sample population. Conversely, suburban schools were underrepresented by more than 15% and medium-sized schools were underrepresented more than 10%. Interestingly, Science and Social Studies tended to be more prone to missing curriculum experiences while Math teachers appear slightly more insulated.

Where They Are Now: Positive Change Over Time

In addition to asking teachers about the level of curriculum support experienced in their first year of teaching, the survey also inquired about how teachers felt about their current curricular environment. As shown in Table 8, the differences between how teachers felt about district provided curriculum support in their first year compared to what they currently experience was massive. In every single category, the most common response shifted to "completely true" and the majority of teachers fell on the positive end of the six-point Likert-scale. Almost 70% of teachers at least somewhat agreed that they have access to high quality, district-provided curriculum materials, and over 75% at least somewhat agreed that all necessary materials were available. While clear expectations from administrators received the lowest agreement rating of scores 4-6 (64.8%), there was overwhelming agreement about ongoing curriculum collaboration with colleagues (87.3%).

It is certainly encouraging to see that teachers' curricular experiences improve so drastically over time, and these observations raise important questions about the processes of curriculum acquisition and support. Most importantly, if teachers are so *unlikely* to feel supported at the beginning of their careers and so *likely* to feel supported later on, what transpires in the space between that contributes to the positive change? Additionally, how is it possible that teachers have access to materials now that they did not have at the beginning of their careers?

Were those changes at the classroom level, at the district level, or at a broader societal level?

These questions will be discussed further in Chapter 5 as recommendations for future research.

Table 9

Teachers' Current Perceptions of Their Curriculum Support

In my current teaching role, I feel like…	1 n (%)	2 n (%)	3 n (%)	4 n (%)	5 n (%)	6 n (%)	Total n (%)
I have access to high quality curriculum materials provided by my district.	11 (8.7)	7 (5.6)	21 (16.7)	30 (23.8)	27 (21.4)	30 (23.8)	126 (100)
I have all the curriculum materials I need to teach my course.	1 (0.8)	8 (6.4)	19 (15.1)	29 (23.0)	28 (22.2)	41 (32.5)	126 (100)
I have clear expectations about curriculum goals from my administrators.	9 (7.2)	16 (12.8)	19 (15.2)	20 (16.0)	25 (20.0)	36 (28.8)	125 (100)
I regularly collaborate with colleagues on curriculum.	2 (1.59)	9 (7.1)	5 (4.0)	28 (22.2)	22 (17.5)	60 (47.6)	126 (100)

Note: 1= not true at all; 6=completely true

Summary of Quantitative Data

The results of this survey illustrate findings in relation to teachers' perceptions of the type and quality of curriculum supports they did or *did not* receive during their first year of professional teaching. In relation to the four missing curriculum criteria, *most* teachers reported lacking at least some important instructional materials, *most* reported lacking important planning materials, *most* reported not receiving clear expectations, and *most* reported not receiving adequate training. While phase two of this study focuses on documenting only the most significant missing curriculum cases, it is important to note that participant responses trended negatively on nearly every response item, suggesting broad curriculum support challenges overall. However, it is also important to note that teachers generally reported that their

curriculum experiences improved over the course of their careers. Of the 134 total respondents, 28 (21.9%) identified as having experienced little to no curriculum support at all, and the implications of these findings will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Phase Two: Qualitative Data

In addition to the quantitative survey data, a qualitative phase was incorporated into the study design in order to better understand participants' missing curriculum experience *in their own terms*. In this phase, five participants were selected for follow-up interviews from within the survey sample. The 15-question interview protocol targeted the three remaining research questions:

(1) What are the specific challenges that teachers ascribe to the experience of teaching without curriculum support?

(2) What structural shortfalls in the onboarding process, if any, contributed to the missing curriculum experience?

(3) How do teachers explain the impact of the missing curriculum experience on their pedagogical development and, ultimately, student learning?

Participant Selection

Participants for phase two were selected based on the degree of missing curriculum experience they had. The main trigger point for phase two recruitment was participants' response to survey question 16, which asked respondents to generally rate the level of support they received overall. Those who responded with a low rating ("1" or "2" on the Likert scale), were asked an open-ended question about how the lack of support impacted them and their students. The written responses to this question initiated the qualitative phase of the study, and they provided the first opportunity to test potential data analysis codes and explore preliminary trends. The respondents who rated question 16 with the lowest level of support (a rating of "1"),

representing the most severe levels of a missing curriculum experience, constituted the final pool from which interview candidates were recruited.

Qualitative Survey Data: Question 17

The final survey question asked select respondents "how did this lack of support you experienced in your first year of teaching impact you and/or your students?" Completed by 59 survey participants, these responses offered the first narrative explanations of what the missing curriculum phenomena *meant* to those who experienced them. While differences in respondents' feelings, attitudes, and perceived impact certainly existed, it was remarkable how similar much of the text was. These similarities were clustered and coded together, allowing for preliminary thematic inquiry in advance of the more nuanced analysis that would come from the interview data.

First, it was immediately clear that for most, a missing curriculum experience constituted a *significant challenge*, both personally and professionally. Statements like "my first year was very stressful," " I was stressed and overworked," "it made me tired and stressed," and "it made my job stressful" echoed the level of challenge shared across the field. Much of this challenge was related to *poor quality or nonexistent materials*. One teacher described a frustrating ordeal of being handed a binder and then being "told that these items were mostly old and ineffective and were being phased out, with no explanation of what to use instead." Another teacher related that their school had "no textbooks and the only materials I was provided was a file cabinet of misc (sic) worksheets the previous teacher used sometimes." Teachers reported investing huge amounts of time and effort, just to stay afloat; in the words of one teacher, "[it] put immense pressure on me to create and distribute and reflect on the materials. It caused me to work 14-16 hours a day and most weekends just to be prepared to teach each day." Teachers used words like "overwhelming" and "exhausting" to describe their experience. While some teachers referenced

an attitude of "survival," others expressed futility, stating "I became burned out" or "I wanted to quit."

Another frequent trend was how teachers described the missing curriculum as creating a competing *sense of urgency while simultaneously feeling lost*. Multiple teachers shared their lack of direction with lines like "I had no idea what I was doing" while others shared a haphazard approach to lesson planning with revelations like "I was learning the material a day or two before my students." Some teachers seemed to be more capable of adapting to the workload the situation sprung upon them, sharing statements like "I had to make it up as I went, but I figured it out," while others seemed to suffer without structured support, sharing that "I was completely on my own and drowning."

This sense of *isolation* was also present across multiple comments. Statements like "I felt alone and unsupported," "I had no one to go to for support," and "it was my responsibility to navigate on my own" showcased the level of independence new teachers needed to operate with. One teacher described their experience as "on an island," without any human or material supports to help them stay afloat. This sensation led to some teachers internalizing their challenges; in the words of one teacher, "I felt very isolated. I felt like I didn't have enough time to take care of myself or seek support […] When I talked to admin about it, our conversations seemed to steer towards me, my personality, my time-management, and not about how the systems of the school led to these circumstances."

In addition to the challenge of simply getting the work done, teachers often felt like their missing curriculum experience had an *impact on teaching quality*, often creating worry that they were not serving their students well. For some, this manifested as a generalized insecurity about their work, arising in statements like "[I was] unsure of myself and my teaching." Others worried more openly about the potential harms on students, sharing statements like "I know my students

deserved better than I provided" or "I didn't feel good about what I was teaching or the product I was giving my students." Others, however, seemed confident in their ability to insulate their students from the planning challenges they faced. Statements like "I do feel I provided the best possible education I could for my students despite the lack of school-provided resources" or "I do not feel it impacted the students because I worked hard for them" showcase the resiliency that some teachers demonstrated. Compared to the overarching commentary, though, these teachers were few and far between.

Of the many challenges expressed to the open-ended survey question, a handful of teachers did express some actual appreciation for their missing curriculum experience. For these teachers, a missing curriculum represented an opportunity for *academic freedom* and an allowance to cater to the students in their classrooms. According to these teachers, "lack of curriculum gave me freedom to help best serve my students" and "this inspired me to develop what I believed were more relevant and engaging materials." One teacher even "liked coming up with things to help my students." These teachers represented a unique subset who demonstrated an aversion to "canned curriculum," who actively "ditched" existing materials in pursuit of their own teaching preferences.

These initial qualitative observations provided a predictor of what was to come in the more in-depth interview process that followed. Indeed, the themes of stress, isolation, and doubt were echoed throughout the interview process. These data points were used as a starting point for developing qualitative data codes, and they served as the first opportunity to explore potential themes as I anticipated the next phase of the study.

Participant Narratives

Of the 28 survey respondents who reported that they received the lowest levels of curriculum support, five were recruited for follow-up interviews. Participants were primarily

targeted based on the recency of their missing curriculum experience. I also attempted to recruit

participants from a variety of disciplines and contexts; however, I was unsuccessful in recruiting

a science certified candidate. Table 9 shows a snapshot of the five selected interview participants

and, at the conclusion of this section, Table 10 shows their overall demographics in comparison

to the missing curriculum sample identified by the survey.

Table 10

Interview Participant Snapshot

Participant Pseudonym	School Type	School Location	School Size	Grade Level	Subject Area	Experience (years)
Rachel	Traditional Public	Suburban	Large	Middle School	English	6-10
Steve	Traditional Public	Urban	Medium	Middle School	Social Studies	11-15
Lynn	Charter	Suburban	Small	Middle School	Social Studies	6-19
Kim	Charter	Urban	Small	High School	Math	11-15
Maria	Traditional Public	Urban	Small	High School	English	16-20

The following section provides detailed narratives of *each* participant's missing

curriculum experience. Before presenting the findings of the thematic analysis, it was first

important to me to share the participants' accounts *in their own terms*, sharing their full missing

curriculum experience in one continuous storyline. My hope is that this format affords the reader

better insight into the unique characteristics of each participant as well as the specific nuances of

the context in which their experience occurred. While this approach may underscore the

differences between each missing curriculum experience, I believe it also allows for a more

complete picture of missing curriculum experiences holistically and the depth of impact that it

can have on a brand new teacher.

Table 11

Interview Participant Demographics

Demographic Label	Missing Curriculum n (%)	Interview Participants n (%)
Total Respondents	28 (100)	5 (100)
Years of Experience		
1-5	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
6-10	5 (17.9)	2 (40.0)
11-15	6 (21.4)	2 (40.0)
16-20	6 (21.4)	1 (20.0)
20+	11 (39.3)	0 (0.0)
Subject		
English	5 (17.9)	1 (20.0)
Math	3 (10.7)	1 (20.0)
Science	7 (25.0)	0 (0.0)
Social Studies	8 (28.6)	2 (40.0)
Multiple	5 (17.9)	1 (20.0)
Grade Level		
Middle School	8 (28.6)	3 (60.0)
High School	20 (71.4)	2 (40.0)
School Type		
Traditional Public	22 (78.6)	3 (60.0)
Charter School	6 (21.4)	2 (40.0)
School Setting		
Rural	7 (25.0)	0 (0.0)
Suburban	8 (28.6)	2 (40.0)
Urban	13 (46.4)	3 (60.0)
School Size		
500 or less	12 (42.9)	3 (60.0)
501 – 1000	11 (39.3)	1 (20.0)
1000+	5 (17.9)	1 (20.0)
Title I		
Yes	16 (57.1)	2 (40.0)
No	5 (17.9)	1 (20.0)
Unsure	7 (25.0)	2 (40.0)

Participant 1: Rachel

Rachel had her missing curriculum experience in 2017 when she began her career teaching at a middle school in a large, affluent school district serving a rural community just outside the suburbs of the major city in the county. Rachel learned one week before school started that she would be teaching 7th-grade ELA and 7th-grade Social Studies, and those were literally the only communications that she received from administration.

Rachel's experience was characterized by a complete absence of expectations. When she asked the other middle school teacher what she should do, her colleague responded with "it's a wide open door. We can do whatever we want." For Rachel, this lack of clarity was stressful, leaving her constantly asking "is this the right book? Is this the right way to go?," and she was frustrated that her district did not have any formal mentor supports for her.

Unfortunately, Rachel's other relationships on campus were less than supportive. Rachel's administrator was on his way out the door, and she quickly identified him as "not a person who was going to support you." She never was observed or had any formal meetings with administration about her role. Simultaneously, Rachel's Social Studies colleague showed no interest in supporting her planning process, and when he called her ideas "stupid" in front of the rest of the teaching team, she never reached out to him again.

Rachel's limited material supports included a "list of titles" that she could teach and a shared GoogleDrive from a colleague, but to her "there [were] probably resources in there, but they weren't necessarily accessible to me." Beyond these few items, Rachel felt that she needed to rely on herself to get the job done, drawing on what little experience she had from the college of education and student teaching.

The job-related stress that Rachel experienced in relation to the missing curriculum was significant. In her words,

I was like 'I don't know if this job is right for me.' I had a really hard time. I ended up

going back to a therapist because I was just feeling so overwhelmed and so burned out.

[…] I already have anxiety and depression, so it kind of triggers some of those emotions

for me being that unorganized and that *out there* with the lack of support from a missing

curriculum.

In this time of need, Rachel became isolated because she "didn't want to be a bother."

She stopped seeking support from others and began to rely entirely on herself. She started

bookending each school day with hours of additional work in order to be prepared for each day,

and she began to purchase curriculum materials out of her own paycheck. She began to build a

curriculum entirely on her own, stating

I literally went piece by piece […] I would use a pretty formal lesson plan format on

GoogleDrive or GoogleDocs and really type *everything* out […] My goal at that time was

'I'll write all these lessons out, and then I will have them all for next year.'

She found most of her support in online educator communities, and she continued to supplement

her materials with what she found online. Reflecting on her craft, Rachel worries that she "taught

things very broadly, and with more curriculum support it could have been a much more targeted

education for these students." However, when reflecting on her overall effort for the school year,

Rachel did feel like she was still able to give her students the best experience she was able to

provide.

Despite the challenge, Rachel does find some silver lining in her missing curriculum

experience. Rachel now has her Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction, serves her

district on curriculum review teams, supports new teachers in her district as an official mentor,

and she hopes to one day transition into a curriculum leadership role for her district.

Participant 2: Steve

Steve graduated from the college of education in 2007, and he struggled to find his first placement for several years. After several long-term substitute teaching stints, he eventually settled in a smaller, urban district in 2012, teaching middle school Social Studies. Steve's start was characterized by some unconventional expectations:

> The teacher that I had replaced and literally took his briefcase and left, so his room was still setup as if he was coming back the next day. The one thing they told me when I got the job was that I was not allowed to use any of the materials he had. […] When I got into the room, I saw file cabinet after file cabinet of all these copies, so I had to go through the file cabinets and literally pitch everything.

Constituting perhaps the most egregious violation of educator norms found in this study, Steve discovered the previous teachers used spit cups for chewing tobacco mixed in with these 'curriculum resources.'

Adding to the confusion, despite being a Social Studies teacher, Steve was told to spend the first eight weeks teaching English skills in order to help boost student scores on the upcoming standardized test. Initially, Steve hoped this would be an opportunity to lean on the English team for curricular support until his principal told him "Hey, we need to tie this into the Social Studies. So, no new material, but it needs to have a Social Studies lean to it." With no background in teaching reading skills, and no idea how to support this vague and ambitious goal before him, Steve felt utterly lost and confused.

Steve expressed that during this first year he felt like he was on an island, and his classroom was "literally on the second floor […] the farthest away from everything." He never had a mentor in his first year of teaching, and the feedback that he got from his administrator was

"you got this, man. You're doing great!" Steve had one classroom textbook to rely on, and it is still the one in use at the district to date.

Steve's district served a predominately Hispanic and African American student body, with many students qualifying for free or reduced meals. Many of Steve's students also qualified for English Learner (EL) services. Steve was passionate about serving the students he was charged to serve. He was intentional about creating frequent student opportunities for "reflection," and he sought feedback often. He spent considerable time creating the best lessons he could, often starting "with a blank document and make an assignment up" based on his understanding of the standards and his students' needs at the time.

Steve's work ethic throughout his missing curriculum experience had considerable consequences for him. He often found himself working at home and struggling with work-life balance. It was during this year that Steve found himself in a divorce, with time spent on his job cited as a reason for separation. He experienced "stress and anxiety," and he was diagnosed with a "stress-induced irregular heartbeat." In his own words, he had a "constant fear that I was letting my kids down and letting my family down because I'm going to spend too much time away from them." These experiences left Steve wondering if his dream of being a teacher was "a wrong dream."

Steve still works for the same district he started in, and he has grown to a leadership position in the Social Studies department, now serving at the high school. He has his Master's Degree in Educational Leadership, and he has been invited to consider administrative positions within the district. He is proud of the many supports for teachers they have built since he started, including new teacher orientation, curriculum maps, and common planning time, but he is still hesitant to "rock the boat" regarding curriculum, because "if you ask for help, they will push you down a specific path and then ask you to use that curriculum instead."

Participant 3: Lynn

Of the five interviews conducted, Lynn's missing curriculum experience seemed the most challenging. Lynn graduated from her educator certification program in 2014, and she soon landed her first job at an urban, for-profit charter middle school teaching Social Studies. The school had a schoolwide Title I program, and it served predominately at-risk students. Based on Lynn's assessment, the school had some structural challenges as well; in her words, "the school had no resources. They had no money is kind of what it came down to. They had no textbooks. They had no online curriculum available […] it was grossly underfunded."

Lynn was afforded a handoff conversation, consisting of a building tour with the retiring teacher she was replacing, and her principal informed her that she would be teaching Geography and Ancient World History. Lynn was promised the resources of the previous teacher, but what she actually received "was a file cabinet full of one-off worksheets that didn't translate to anything […] it was basically that he didn't clean out the file cabinet in his room." When Lynn asked for material support,

> they said if you wanted to use textbook stuff, you could find a textbook that you wanted and get a sample copy for free. Then you could make photocopies for the kids of all the pages you wanted to use. But, their photocopy system was really outdated, so when you actually photocopied a textbook the kids couldn't actually read it. I realized quickly that that wasn't a sustainable option for the kids either.

Beyond the dearth of materials, what compounded Lynn's challenges was the general curriculum *environment*. Each class she taught was divided into two sections, a "high" class and a "low" class. The high class included all of the students "who were more academically inclined […] and the low class was all the kids who struggled." According to Lynn,

The principal at that time thought that it allowed for more differentiation – that you could work slower with the low kids and faster with the high kids. But really, how it shook out was that the kids knew what was going on […] so it ended up being a really terrible self-fulfilling prophecy because they were old enough to understand that that was what was happening.

For Lynn, who felt completely unprepared to differentiate materials, this resulted in continuous classroom management challenges that amounted to a daily battle to make it to the next bell.

In order to teach her class, Lynn turned to the only resource that she felt she had: the internet. By Googling the state Social Studies standards, she eventually discovered a school website that had posted "a PowerPoint and a packet that went with every unit […] and so every day I just did three or four pages of that packet, and we would work our way through it, and I wrote my own tests." The materials featured some standards alignment documentation, so she felt like these were the best resources she had to ensure that she was doing the *right* work with the students. However, this approach felt stifling to Lynn, like she was not doing her best to serve her students; she said "It was a terrible curriculum. It was super dry […] It was just checking the box of 'you're here and you're learning this.'"

Despite the structure Lynn inherited with these resources, Lynn still spent considerable time and energy preparing for her daily routine. Lynn said that preparing for school was her entire "life" that year. In her words, "I had no life outside of school. I just came home and was always grading or trying to figure out what I was doing the next day […] I just was always in my room just working on school."

Lynn also reported feeling completely isolated in her building. Lynn taught in a portable unit, detached from the main school building. With total sarcasm, Lynn recalls "my favorite was the tornado drills we did. I was like 'the tornado is going to destroy this thing. I mean, what is

the point of even doing the drill?'" Any training Lynn experienced before the start of the school year was limited to "how to spot hidden things that the kids might bring drugs into school with," and, while Lynn was required to participate in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with her grade level team, the focus of those meetings was "a trash talk session of the kids – it wasn't ever anything constructive." Lynn reported that the only feedback she ever received from her administrator was when she got scolded in front of her class for sending a student to the office in hopes of classroom management support.

The personal impact of the year on Lynn was significant. She described her first year of teaching as "traumatic." Here is how Lynn characterizes her missing curriculum experience:

> It was just really hard for me mentally and emotionally […] I was just in survival mode all the time , and I realize the impact that it really had on me. I cried on my way home from work every single day. I hated it. I hated my job so much. I enjoyed a few of the kids, but it was so hard at that time that I was like 'I don't want anything to do with this place!'

At the end of that first year, Lynn quit her job with no other employment prospects lined up. She questioned whether or not she was meant to be a teacher, and she felt like she had failed.

After some encouragement from her parents, Lynn did eventually return to education. With nearly 10 years' experience, Lynn now teaches at the high school level and is beginning a new school year at the third district of her career. Lynn says her missing curriculum experience has forced her to become more "independent" and more "confident" in her practice, and she knows how to gather resources and build plans from scratch to make quality lesson plans. However, she also recognizes that her missing curriculum year has left her with "a deep mistrust of leadership" and "it also made me not ask for help when maybe I needed it because I had been shut down so many other times before."

Participant 4: Kim

Kim graduated from the college of education in 2009 and had her first year of teaching and her missing curriculum experience the following school year. She landed her first job teaching mathematics at an urban, for-profit charter high school that was only in its second year of operation. Her career began as a part-time employment opportunity teaching pre-Algebra, but the school's other math teacher resigned shortly thereafter, allowing her to move to full-time employment while also requiring her to cover his classes.

In her own words, Kim received "very little to no curriculum support." Her course goals were described to her as "there are kids who are behind grade level, and we need to try to close that gap as best we can." While she was told her course title and her essential charge, she "got to be the decider – the sole decider – of what was placed in front of the kids." Equipped with that information, Kim worked to define "success in Algebra just from my own personal experience of high school mathematics," relying heavily on her university training and her own opinions.

Kim did have a textbook to use with her students, so she worked forward in traditional, rote fashion, going page by page each day with the one resource she had available. Kim became frustrated with her own pedagogy, feeling like "I can't teach this way for the rest of my life. If I'm going to be in the classroom, I cannot get up here and lecture these kids every day. There has to be something better." Kim made assignments and assessments from the textbook or entirely from scratch, and she relied heavily on the internet to find resources for her classroom. Working for a for-profit charter school, Kim shared that "every decision felt like it was made with finances in mind," and when she asked for material support, she was encouraged to find the best *free* resources. So, the need for daily lesson plans and materials to use with the students consumed her personal time. She described her daily routine as "you teach all day, you come

home, you eat dinner, and then it's like 'I'm making lessons for the next day.' I'd say I was putting in probably three hours a night *at least* doing something work related."

Kim did have a small department team alongside her as well as congenial administration, but, to her, the whole environment seemed very inexperienced. In her words, "everybody in the company was very young. There weren't a lot of veteran teachers […] the administration was probably 30." Turnover was significant in the district, and she saw many colleagues come and go. As an illustration, Kim was the most senior teacher in her department at the end of her second year, and she described it as "the blind leading the blind." Any feedback she received that year was difficult for her to internalize because it came from the former Social Studies teacher who was suddenly made into the assistant principal. In describing the environment, Kim said "It was very fast-paced. I think everything got thrown together […] Our leadership was very nice and very friendly and I think wanted to be supportive […] I just don't think anybody in that position necessarily knew what to do." This environment created a situation where Kim was left to fend for herself, building her classroom on her own and from the ground up.

Kim described this year as "survival driven," "uncertain," and "challenging." When she thinks back to launching her career in her early 20s, she says she "couldn't do that lifestyle now," referencing the constant demand of being work focused nearly every waking hour. At the same time, Kim believes her experience has forged her into a "seeker of answers," who is more "self-led," and, quite frankly, "a better teacher." While she is happy she has resources like a curriculum map and a scope and sequence to support the new teachers she now mentors, she also finds herself wondering if they might have it too easy; she does not see them working as hard for their classrooms as she had to.

After several years working for the same charter high school where she began her career, Kim eventually transitioned to a traditional public school. She decided to further her education,

and she completed a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction. She now serves as a team lead for the mathematics department, and recently helped support the team through a new curriculum adoption.

Participant 5: Maria

Maria began her teaching career in 2005 at a medium-sized urban public high school that enrolled approximately 200 students per grade level. Most of the students Maria served met the household income threshold to qualify for free or reduced meals, so the district also qualified for a schoolwide Title I program. Maria was hired to teach English to the high school freshmen with no other course title than "English 9," no syllabus, and no course description. She was also the only teacher assigned to teach that course.

Maria's transition into the role was quite a challenge. She reported that "the curriculum director never sat down with me and said 'here's our district curriculum' […] I was basically given the keys to my classroom and told to make myself at home." The course's previous teacher was "forced to retire," so Maria was not afforded any conversation with anyone who had taught the course previously. Leadership was also in transition across both the building and the district, so when Maria looked to find assistance, they were busy "putting out other fires."

To start off her planning, Maria was given "a binder from the ISD […] but there wasn't a scope and sequence. There were snippets of lesson plans and master copies of worksheets […] but it wasn't very comprehensive." Maria began to scour the classroom she had inherited in search of other instructional materials:

> I opened the closets in my classroom and found 20 very old, probably from the 1980s,
> beat up literature textbooks and then probably 200 brand new grammar textbooks – like
> straight up the study of grammar – from separate curriculums […] I also had class sets of
> novels that I don't even know how old they were – like westerns from the 1960s!

To Maria, this assortment of resources was both cynically comical and wildly inappropriate; the idea of teaching westerns to the diverse student body she was charged to serve seemed borderline degrading, if not completely insulting. In Maria's words, "The things I had were so old and embarrassing. Honestly, if I was a parent sending my child to that school and seeing what was offered to my kid, I would have probably gone and complained […] it was not equitable for the students in front of me to have such poor materials."

Maria was very much motivated by her calling to provide a quality education to underserved populations, and the lack of materials dedicated to her students felt very *pointed* to her. From her perspective

> I feel like students in districts where a lot of students come from poverty get the short end of the stick, and that happens to our students a lot. I feel like there ends up being an air of complacency – like they should just be thankful to have a book. No! They deserve high quality books. Go to this rich district over there – what makes our kids less deserving than those kids? The fact that their parents make more money, they deserve better materials? […] When our kids are on sports teams and they travel to other buildings, and they see what other buildings have and how nice their facilities are, they return to our district and they feel defeated.

Even as a first year teacher, Maria felt it was her "role to advocate": "to hand a kid a book from the 1980s in 2005 that has half the cover ripped off and cuss words from the past 20 years written inside and pages ripped out […], it impacts student engagement."

And so, Maria dedicated all of her energies to creating the best educational experience for her students that she could, entirely on her own. Drawing off of her university experience, she worked to create thematic-based units, using materials that she found online or in literature anthologies from college. She spent considerable time at the copy machine, but she "felt guilty"

about replicating materials that she did not have license to use, saying "at times I felt like I was breaking the law in order to do my job, and that made me feel weird and unethical – but what other choice did I have?" While she tried her best to keep a work-life balance, she found herself coming into work two hours early, working through lunch, and also trying to keep up with lesson plans *while* she was with students in the classroom. Maria often supplemented her classroom resources with her own personal funds, buying books for her classroom library, materials like paper and pens, and even purchasing lesson plans online from resources like TeachersPayTeachers.

While Maria feels like she did a "decent job" with her students that year, when asked if she would have been more impactful with more material support, she answered "absolutely." During that year, she described feeling "lost," "worried," and "disconnected." To her, the daily experience was "very stressful" and she "questioned if I really knew what I was doing." While she did have department colleagues, Maria remembers how she "didn't want them to know how hard I was struggling. I wanted to be seen as effective and knowledgeable and that I could do the job that I was given."

Despite these challenges, Maria was motivated by the experience she had during her year of teaching with a missing curriculum. In the years that followed, she actively sought opportunities to be involved in district curriculum decision-making, and she became a recognized teacher-leader in her building. She now serves the same district as a full-time instructional coach, supporting new teachers and veteran teachers with curriculum decision-making and the practical application of instructional strategies.

Participant Summary

This preceding testimony from the five interview participants details five missing curriculum experiences in the field of public education. The five detailed accounts of beginning a

teacher career without curriculum materials or support span across a decade and occurred in varied school contexts, grade levels, and subject areas. Each account also featured its own unique challenges, dependent upon the nuanced experience of each teacher's first year. Despite these many differences, many interesting similarities were also observed that provide insight into what curriculum-related shortfalls are the most perilous, what resources are the most needed, and what ways new teachers cope throughout a missing curriculum experience. The following section details the results of the qualitative data analysis and presents the major themes identified in the research.

Major Themes

In addition to sharing participants' narratives of their missing curriculum experiences, interview responses were analyzed in order to identify relevant themes across the multiple cases. Following the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), findings were determined through the systematic analysis of specific quotes from participants and the *"horizontalization"* of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 26-27). The words of participants were categorized by meaning and eventually presented as four distinct thematic titles in correspondence with the original research sub-questions: (1) Entering the Missing Curriculum Island, (2) Teaching to a Missing Curriculum, (3) Trial by Fire Professional Development, and (4) Practical Advice from Those Who Lived It. In order to best describe the lived experience of the missing curriculum phenomenon, the resulting themes were organized as a chronology of the missing curriculum school year and are illustrated by the framework presented at the end of this chapter (Figure 5). With this model, I aimed to portray the missing curriculum phenomenon *as participants told it*, using thematic titles to describe the phases of their missing curriculum school year, beginning with their arrival into the missing curriculum environment, transitioning

to their day-to-day challenges, sharing their lasting impressions of the experience, and culminating with participants' recommendations for the field based on their experience.

Theme 1: Arriving on Missing Curriculum Island

When interviewing participants about their missing curriculum experiences, some of the most vivid memories and most colorful descriptions came from the very first week of the job. It was in this phase of the school year that teachers found themselves processing just exactly what they had gotten themselves into, and it was in this time period that most fast-paced adjustments needed to be made in order to meet the day-to-day demands of the job. This thematic category is intended to profile just what it is like to step into the missing curriculum phenomenon, and within this topic, participants focused on how their experience began, the curricular expectations they received, the overarching attitudes of the organization related to curriculum, and a prevailing sensation of absolute isolation. The word "island" was intentionally chosen to profile how participants began their missing curriculum journey; not only was this word used twice in the qualitative survey question and in two separate interviews, but the sensation of being 'cut off' persisted across all five missing curriculum accounts.

Abruptly Coming On Board. While participants' missing curriculum contexts varied across school type, school demographics, and overall job description, there were many similarities in relation to how each new teacher began their missing curriculum experience. Despite the differences between schools, four of the five teachers believed their school was "underfunded," or at least financially mismanaged, which seemed to provide some of the basis for the curriculum challenges they eventually faced.

Each of these teachers was hired late in the season, with Kim describing her hiring as "pretty last minute," Rachel "walked in the week [she] was supposed to start," and Steve reporting that he had not entered the school "until the week before school started." This rushed

approach to the hiring process seemed to limit both the quantity and the quality of curriculum-related conversations these teachers were able to have before teaching actually began.

Steve, Kim, and Maria expressed excitement about starting their first job, but the interviews revealed that these teachers felt unprepared for the job they were hired to perform. Lynn reported that, while she had completed student teaching, she "didn't really know what she was doing," and Maria shared that "college had prepared me for one type of experience […], but when I got into my actual job, I didn't have the support I had when student teaching." Similarly, Lynn and Kim reported that the training they received before school started did not really translate to helping them launch their classroom; Kim's experience focused on a book study "that wasn't Math related" and Lynn learned how to detect drugs before school began.

Most striking were the descriptions of the handoff (or lack thereof) that these teachers experienced when beginning their first classrooms. Steve and Maria both replaced teachers who were forced out the door, and were afforded no communication about the course, Kim was in charge of starting a brand new course from scratch while also covering for a colleague who resigned, and Lynn's handoff was the inheritance of a classroom that a retiring teacher did not clean out. Curriculum stability is *dependent* on an unbroken chain of material coordination, and in these cases, these teachers had no opportunity to learn from the professional practice of those who came before.

Unclear Professional Expectations. One of the major challenges for each participant was simply that they did not quite know exactly *what their job was.* Each of the five teachers was only afforded course titles by their administrators, and they were left to their own devices to determine what that charge was. Rachel's experience provides a common frame that was mirrored in each of the other interviews: "'We're hiring you for the 7th grade English position – congratulations!' That was about all the communication I got from administration," she related.

Similarly, Maria shared that she could not even find written descriptions of her courses in the district, Steve's only expectation was that he was not allowed to use existing materials, and Kim got to be the "sole decider" of what was taught in her classroom. For these teachers, these loose parameters simply did not provide enough direction to let them know if they were doing *what they were supposed to be doing*, and they did not feel like they had the professional experience yet to make the type of calls this level of independence required.

Leadership *in general* seemed to be lacking in each environment. Steve's and Maria's schools were recovering from firing the past year's principals, Kim's entire administrative team was brand new, and Lynn had "no curriculum person on campus." Similarly, Rachel described her principal as "very, very, very hands off" and "not a person who was going to support you." While some experienced classroom observations in their first year, none of their feedback was curriculum oriented. Steve reported hearing positive affirmations like "you got this, man," but it did not seem accurate in relation to how he was feeling, and all of Lynn's recollections about her interactions with her supervisor were chastising, embarrassing, and alienating. Without clear direction and without strong leadership at the helm, these teachers found themselves floundering when questions arose about how to best fulfill their job duties.

A Discouraging Curricular Environment. Beyond the absence of school leadership, it appeared that there were systemic components that contributed to missing curriculum experiences. While many of the districts featured department teams, grade level teams, and/or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), these structures did not seem to meet their academic intent. For Lynn, PLCs were mostly about venting about classroom management challenges; for Kim, she was the senior member of her department by the end of her first year; and for Steve, his department found out that if they asked questions, they got answers that they did not want, so they learned to keep quiet. Maria also had a department, but they were not actually required to

meet, and they did not have any common planning time. In these cases, the very structures that are intended to promote curriculum development, seemed incapable of doing so because of how they were structured or facilitated.

Mentors supports were similarly lacking across the board. Rachel reported having a mentor, but the support was infrequent and unreliable. Kim had a mentor who had one total year of teaching experience. Steve knew he was supposed to have a mentor, but he never got one until he started his second year of teaching. For each of these teachers, an assigned "master teacher" mentor was legally required by state law (Revised School Code of 1976, 2023).

In some of the schools there were also unique structures that also seemed to confound teachers' curricular efforts. For example, in Steve's case, he was asked to not teach his own course content for the first several weeks of school, in favor of teaching reading with the hopes of boosting standardized test scores. In Lynn's case, her classes were split based on the *behaviors* of her students, creating separate classes that she had no ability to create differentiated lesson plans for. These types of course irregularities seemed to exacerbate the already confusing situations these teachers were trying to navigate.

The (Missing) Human Connection. One of the most uniting features of the five interviews was feelings of isolation that each teacher shared. For some, the isolation was physical. Steve found himself tucked away in the furthest corner of the second story of his building, sometimes responding to fights entirely on his own. Lynn found herself in a portable unit detached from the main campus, so far from other classrooms that the school's wireless internet did not reach her classroom. Kim was cut-off simply because her campus was in the midst of a staffing crisis.

For others, the feeling of isolation arose from the interpersonal interactions, and when people felt shut down by their co-workers, they often found themselves retreating permanently.

For example, Rachel shared this account of an interaction she had with a teacher she was supposed to be collaborating with:

> I think it highlights the general lack of support that everybody was cool with […] I remember sitting at lunch and sharing that I decided to take this chapter and do something really cool with it. I was going to have students do a very hands-on activity. They were going to take a shoe box and fill it with artifacts that would be representative of who they thought these different historical figures were, and we were going to do a whole gallery walk, and I just remember that teacher saying "that's stupid" […] in front of all the other seventh grade teachers.

Rachel stopped collaborating with her colleagues after that early experience, and Lynn shared a similarly embarrassing experience with her administrator.

Maria's sense of isolation was more internalized and self-imposed. She was the only teacher at her grade level and she was hesitant to reach out for support. In her reflections, she recalled not wanting to burden her colleagues with her challenges, as they had their own work to do, and it was important to her that she appeared capable to her colleagues and supervisors.

Whatever the cause, these isolating factors served to *keep* these teachers bound to their missing curriculum experience. It limited their ability to seek support, and it forced them to tackle their missing curriculum challenges on their own.

Theme 2: Teaching to a Missing Curriculum

Once teachers had accepted their positions in a missing curriculum environment, there was an immediate need to place their full focus on preparing to face their students. Without colleagues, leaders, or clear expectations to guide them, the onus of figuring out what exactly to *do* fell squarely on their shoulders. Daily life in a missing curriculum experience seemed like a

scramble as each teacher simply tried to stay afloat, and this approach to planning and pedagogy had real impacts on students, teaching style, and the teachers themselves.

Limited Material Infrastructure. Participants were very clear about what materials they were and *were not* given as well as what materials they wished they had in that first year. Teachers *at best* were afforded the basics. In terms of district resources, Rachel was given a list of novels she could use, and Kim had brand new textbooks for her brand new course. What materials they did have were often of poor quality. Steve and Maria also had course texts, but these materials were dated, damaged, and often irrelevant in their eyes. For example, Maria's literature resources included sets of decades-old Western novels in her once-rural school that now served an urban, primarily Hispanic student body. The textbooks that were old when Steve arrived on campus in 2007 are still on shelves in his district in 2023. On the extreme end, Lynn had no district-provided materials whatsoever, and she needed to work entirely from scratch to create content for her class.

What was most striking was the haphazard approach to curriculum organization. Most often, these teachers had to *discover* these resources on their own – they were never inventoried, outlined, or intentionally arranged. Maria found her district resources by opening random closets in her building. Lynn found herself rummaging in file cabinets that had been abandoned by her former teacher. Steve recalled finding a critically valuable CD of resources "literally stuck to the inside of one of the file cabinet doors. And that was after I pulled all the junk out and saw it sitting there – this is insane, just insane." Rachel had a colleague who was willing to share resources with her on GoogleDrive "but it wasn't organized enough to be useful." And, while Kim's district had just acquired her textbooks months prior, there was nobody on campus who could tell her why those resources were purchased or how they were intended to be used.

Prepping, Planning, and Pedagogy. Without concrete provided materials to rely on, each teacher was left to fend for themselves in relation to the content that they needed to put in front of students. Teachers first tried to use what little experience they had to their own benefit, referencing back to their college experiences. Maria found herself digging out her literature anthologies from college, and Kim found herself diving back into the methods class she took as an undergraduate. Steve and Rachel actually reached out to their previous college professors in search of advice on how to navigate the challenge in front of them.

In similar fashion, some teachers reached out to other non-traditional personnel supports as they were grasping for someone to collaborate with. Steve called friends who worked at other schools. While Rachel did not find support within her department or her administrative team, she eventually developed a helpful relationship with the school librarian. Lynn, also separated from her department, built constructive relationships with other teachers who taught in nearby portables, even though they taught different content and different grade levels with no official job overlap, aside from teaching in the same school system.

In search of usable materials, the internet proved a functional source for all five participants. Lynn found herself Googling the state standards in search of helpful websites, Steve often used YouTube to find content-related videos, Rachel spent a lot of time on teacher Instagram, and Rachel and Maria both purchased curriculum resources regularly from TeachersPayTeachers. What seemed most helpful in this space was when teachers landed on online communities of content area teachers that were dedicated to improving the craft. Maria mentioned specifically how beneficial it was to find "discussion forums where you could talk with other teachers or just read other teachers' discussions."

While these sources were sometimes fruitful, there were other times when materials needed to be made entirely from scratch. Each teacher described the need for material creation in

at least some fashion, ranging from the lesson plan to PowerPoint slides to assignments and even the tests. This ad hoc way of material sourcing and development yielded vastly different planning processes for each of the teachers interviewed. Maria and Rachel felt well-prepared to plan using "backwards design," and while the process of planning from scratch created fatigue, they felt capable of designing quality lessons. Steve relied heavily on the feedback of his students, repeatedly asking their perspective on how things were going and using data from class assignments to tweak and adjust future lessons. For Lynn and Kim, they let the materials they found guide the planning process, which for them resulted in very linear lesson plans. Kim literally went page by page in the textbook she had, while Lynn did the same with packets that she downloaded from the internet.

Significant Personal Investment. This process of building curriculum both from scratch and *as it needed to be taught* required significant personal investment. Time was a significant factor for all five participants and each described a need to commit well beyond the traditional workday. Rachel described her at-home planning process as requiring "hours and hours," and Steve shared "I would get there at 6:00 AM, and I wasn't leaving until 7:30 most nights […] And then all weekend – I put in six hours on Saturday and another six on Sunday, just trying to make it to Monday morning." Both Kim and Lynn used the phrase "my life" to describe the level of investment their planning process required. While Maria tried hard to create a work-life balance, she realized that her efforts to "not bring work home," ultimately just ended up in her staying at work longer and skipping any opportunity to be socially present throughout her workday.

Two of the five participants also reported a need to commit their own funds to support the requirements of their job. Rachel reported that she spent "a lot" of her own money "trying to build a classroom library and trying to purchase curriculum materials." In regards to spending personal funds on the classroom, from Maria's perspective "every teacher does […] what we

have is never adequate." She found herself buying actual textbooks, novels for her classroom library, curriculum materials, and even basic classroom supplies like paper and pencils from Amazon and Ebay.

The Student Impact. While the five teachers experienced similar challenges in planning lessons and creating necessary materials, they had very different perceptions of how their missing curriculum experience impacted their students. For Steve, he felt it was his duty to hold it together for his students, regardless of the investment required. In his words, the students were "the number one thing that was always on my mind through all this, being a student-centered guy, I never wanted them to feel any of the pressure that I was feeling." In his view, he felt like he was able to shelter the students from the challenges of the missing curriculum through his own efforts, providing a quality learning experience.

For Rachel and Kim, results were more mixed. Both felt sure that their students learned that year, but they also recognized that some of the finer points were missing. In Rachel's words, "I don't think it impacted them in a seriously negative way," but she often worried about curriculum alignment issues, wondering if what she was doing was "a waste of time" and if "something else would have better served them." Kim's reflections were similar in that she was sure the "kids learned math – or they were able to produce math – but I don't know how much had a deep understanding of math, though." Both teachers found themselves replicating what they referred to as traditional styles of education, primarily dependent on lecture and guided notes, while students completed worksheets at their desks. What was most frustrating for Kim was that "no one got to even think about best teaching practices because we were creating the materials." In this way, the teachers saw themselves implementing a base-line functional curriculum that could fill the space of instructional time, but it was not developed enough to provide the type of learning impact that they would have hoped for.

Maria's reflections were similar in that she was frustrated by the lack of depth and support she was able to provide. She worried that her materials did not have supports for the English Learners she was charged to serve, and she was also frustrated that her materials did not seem culturally responsive, or even culturally representative, of the students in her classroom. She found herself focusing on the juxtaposition of teaching "students from immigrant families who have experienced systemic racism" with materials comprised "of very traditional works by deceased American and British authors." For Maria, she feared that the materials she brought forward may have contributed to an ethical *harm* in her educational context.

Lynn also saw her missing curriculum experience as harmful to her students. Lynn used words like "terrible," "dry," and "boring," and she described the experience for students as "a holistically bad situation for them." Her guilt weighed heavily on her as she described her materials as having "no personality," saying that "all my lessons felt like this very generic teaching," and sharing that each lesson felt like it was "just checking the box." It was clear from her account that she felt like she had failed in this first year.

It was interesting that teachers perceived such varying outcomes for their students from very similar instructional challenges. While I can present no actual data in terms of student achievement from those years, some teachers seemed to feel like they had prevailed over the challenge while others felt like they had been defeated. These reflections and attitudes seemed to vary in relation to each teacher's overall affect and demeanor, their level of self-confidence and resilience, their perception of their overall skill level and degree of preparedness, and the degree to which they were willing to completely dedicate themselves to their classroom.

Theme 3: Trial by Fire Professional Development

Entering the profession of teaching is a challenging prospect *generally*, and the burnout rate for new teachers is well-documented. It is for this reason that new teachers are required to

have mentors and are required to have district-provided professional development specific to their needs. For these teachers beginning their careers without human or material supports, the stresses of entering the profession were magnified tremendously and, in many cases, left impressions that lasted long beyond that initial year of teaching.

The Human Toll. Whether or not teachers perceived their missing curriculum experience had a direct impact on their students, all of them agreed that the experience took a toll on them both professionally and personally. Words like "traumatic," "lost," "worried," and "challenging" were what the teachers used to describe this phase of their career. Steve, Lynn, and Kim all used the word "survival" when referring to their missing curriculum experience.

"Stress" was also specifically mentioned by four of the five participants, and the descriptions they provided transcended the healthy bounds of work-related stress. Steve described his year as "the most stressful year of teaching I've ever had," and he described losing "10 pounds just from the stress" as well as developing a diagnosed "stress-induced irregular heartbeat." Steve also saw his missing curriculum as a major contributing factor to his divorce. Lynn described crying on her way home from work every single day. Rachel's level of stress, anxiety, and depression in relation to her job reached such a degree that she began seeing a therapist at the end of the first semester.

For some, the emotions they carried toward their missing curriculum experience manifested in ways that impacted their professional approach as well. Steve reported that his colleagues guided him to start using his sick days to take necessary personal breaks from the work environment. Lynn reported developing a deep mistrust of school leadership that persisted even when she changed schools and found herself in a much more supportive environment. Maria reported moving away from colleagues and social events at the school to focus exclusively on her classroom needs, which in some ways reinforced the challenges she was experiencing.

These feelings of continuous hardship manifested as a sense of doubt for each teacher as they processed whether or not they had landed in the right field. Steve recalled wondering if he had been chasing the "wrong dream," and Lynn "thought at the end of that year that I was not destined for teaching." Rachel and Maria also found themselves doubting their abilities and thinking "I don't know if this is the right job for me." With such persistent challenge alongside no affirmation or support, it is easy to see how some teachers might choose to exit the field entirely after such a trying year.

Forced Growth and Development. What was perhaps most interesting about interviewing these teachers was learning that not only did they not quit the profession, many of them had risen to instructional leadership positions. Rachel, Steve, Kim, and Maria all have earned Master's Degrees in their time since their missing curriculum experience. Three of those degrees are focused on curriculum and instruction, whereas Steve's degree is concentrated on educational leadership. These four also have risen to elevated instructional roles within their districts, with Steve and Kim serving as department chairs, Rachel serving as a teacher leader on specific school-wide committees, and Maria serving as an instructional coach. All four have also taken a hands-on approach to school curriculum issues, including leading curriculum adoption processes, developing orientation programs for new teachers, and creating internal structures to support curriculum alignment and review.

For these teachers, it appeared that they were able to use their missing curriculum experience as a professional motivator. According to Rachel, "the experience that I had my first year of teaching […] inspired me to dig deeper into this profession rather than shy away from it." For Steve, his experience gave him "a lot of latitude to try and fail," which for him eventually resulted in a pedagogy that he was proud of and confident in. Lynn saw herself develop into a

more "independent" teacher, capable of solving problems on her own, and Kim became a "seeker of answers" that, over time, shaped her into a more skilled and capable teacher.

For these teachers, their missing curriculum experience was a sort of trial by fire experience that forced them to earn their stripes in a way that other teachers might not ever realize. Kim aptly summarizes,

> I look at now the new hires we have in our department fresh out of college, and we're always like 'man, they have it so *easy*.' We're giving them all of our stuff that we've made and created, even with our new curriculum, and they're walking out the door at 3:00. Man, it's so funny when you hear them complain. It's like 'oh, maybe you're just not the same way we were built because we had to do those things.'

In some ways, these missing curriculum experiences were a sort of badge of honor – a sign that these teachers had made it through the hard part of teaching and were therefore a different caliber of teacher altogether. At the same time, these teachers were quite reticent to recommend their pathway as a preferred course for professional development.

Theme 4: Practical Advice from Those Who Lived It

This section breaks from the lived experience of participants and instead focuses on practical implications for the field of education. The final questions of the semi-structured interview protocol requested advice that each participant might offer to the field based on their missing curriculum experience. While the advice offered is based solely on the perspectives of the five teachers who shared it, my hope is that these responses underscore the overall pragmatic intent of the study and provide insight into potential avenues for further inquiry.

The Material Basics. The five teachers were admittedly divided on *how much* material support districts should provide and how much academic freedom should be afforded. Lynn and Kim stressed the importance of having resources available and then letting teachers themselves

choose what they wanted to use and what they did not. Steve shared a strong aversion to schoolwide curriculum adoption efforts and desired to keep curricular control within his department. Rachel and Maria believe that schools need "a common, established, published curriculum." In Rachel's words, "there have to be documents somewhere that you can give to a new teacher!" Maria voiced strong advocacy for a unified, school approach to curriculum while also summarizing the complexities of curricular control:

> As I've continued my teaching career, and I've had opportunities to be more involved in leadership, it has made me understand the prioritization of certain things over others. There are a lot of teachers who are very strong advocates for academic freedom for teachers, and, to an extent, I believe in that. On the other hand, I also understand why it's important for there to be systemic control to some extent of what curriculum is used in the building. I think that there should be a scope and sequence district wide so that there's alignment vertically from grade-level to grade-level -- and so that people know what's going to be taught and it isn't fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants every day. I just don't think that results in a high quality education for students.

What these teachers were unified in was seeing a need for the materials that provided *organization* to the task in front of them. While books and worksheets provide activities for students to do, the most difficult part of the job for these teachers was simply not having any direction on *what* to do. Four of the five teachers referenced a desire for a "curriculum map" or a "scope and sequence," specifically, which they saw as one of the most important material supports for a new teacher. Lynn described "the necessity of there being at least an outline" of the course, and Rachel emphasized that "a curriculum map and scope and sequence would have been fantastic to know where students where coming from and where they were headed – what they needed to know." From their lens, these types of organizational materials provide teachers

with the clarity necessary to fulfill their role, while still affording them the ability to use their own professional *style* in regards to classroom implementation.

Colleague to Colleague. In regards to what recommendations they would make to a new teacher who found themself in the midst of a missing curriculum experience, ideas and advice were varied. Some recommended learning the internal processes of the school while others made referrals to specific subject-area resources. The one piece of advice that each teacher seemed to coalesce around was the importance of finding collegial support. Rachel shared that new teachers need to "find a friendly face […] it doesn't necessarily have to be somebody on your team. It could be a teacher that teaches a different subject, but you have to be willing to put yourself out their socially." Lynn agreed, saying that "if you can't find [support] in your building, it's smart to go somewhere else because there are people all over the country who have been doing the same thing you're doing and doing it well." Steve also replied similarly, stressing the need to "ask for help" and sharing that "the most detrimental thing" for him was staying by himself. Maria added that even if these support people cannot be found in-person, there are great professional teaching communities online that are more than willing to support new teachers. To these teachers, *the most important* resource for a new teacher to seek out was a colleague who could guide them.

For the Leadership Team. For school leadership in charge of onboarding new teachers and curating school curriculum, the teachers placed a high value on developing a supportive school culture. Lynn spoke to the importance of a school "culture of being willing to share resources and being willing to share what you've learned" while Maria spoke to the need for schools to be "collaborative" places for adults to work. For Steve, it was important that leadership was visible in their willingness to support, recommending "pop-ins […] so that teacher knows that you support that process as an administrator, and you want them to succeed."

For some, a supportive climate would benefit from formalized support structures. Both Steve and Maria saw common planning time for departments as a meaningful structure to support teacher collaboration. More commonly, Rachel, Steve, Kim, and Maria all voiced a need for a formalized mentor program for new teachers. In Rachel's words, "there has to be a specific program […] there just has to be more attention paid to your new teachers." For Kim, in order for mentor programs to be effective, though, they need to be better defined; quality programs should be able to define "what conversations you should be having," "how regularly you should be checking in," and a sort of "checklist of items that you should be doing with your new teacher."

Additionally, both Maria and Lynn called for administrators to implement systems for curriculum support. In Lynn's mind, this looks like using a digital Learning Management System (LMS) to capture and house the curriculum resources of previous teachers. For Maria, this was more about having written processes published internally to detail how curriculum should be accessed, adopted, and maintained. In their minds, these ideas represented ways that school leaders could leverage their ability to influence *how* the school functioned in support of teachers' curriculum efforts in ways that typical teachers just do not have the ability to do from their classrooms.

Qualitative Phase Summary

In this section, the missing curriculum phenomenon is described in the terms of five teachers who have lived the experience of starting their teaching career without curriculum support. First, the case narratives of each participant were published in order to help the reader envision the missing curriculum phenomenon as a singular experience; it was important to me to showcase (1) *how the experience began*, (2) *how each teacher navigated the challenge*, and (3) *the lasting impact of the experience*.

As I began the data analysis process, I embraced this chronological, narrative approach. Using the original research questions as a guide, I used the thematic units to group categories and codes within phases that I saw emerging in the missing curriculum experience. Theme one, "Arriving on Missing Curriculum Island," focused on the immediacy of the challenges that presented themselves from the point of hire. Theme two, "Teaching to a Missing Curriculum," explored the daily grind of teachers navigating a classroom without direction or support. Theme three, "Trial by Fire Professional Development," shared the lasting legacy of the missing curriculum experience, and theme four, "Practical Advice from Those Who Lived it," provides recommendations from each teacher to help minimize and mitigate missing curriculum experiences. Figure 5 below provides a framework to support visualization of the missing curriculum data analysis.

Figure 5

A Framework to Interpret Missing Curriculum Themes

**Teaching through the Missing Curriculum Phenomenon
A Thematic Framework**

Theme 1: Arriving on Missing Curriculum Island

Abruptly Coming On Board → Unclear Professional Expectations →
A Discouraging Curricular Environment→ The (Missing) Human Connection

↓

Theme 2: Teaching to a Missing Curriculum

Limited Material Infrastructure → Prepping, Planning, and Pedagogy →
Significant Personal Investment → The Student Impact

↓

Theme 3: Trial by Fire Professional Development

The Human Toll → Forced Growth and Development

Practical Advice from Those Who Lived It

1. The Material Basics

2. Colleague to Colleague

3. For the Leadership Team

Chapter 4 Closure

This chapter details the findings of both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this mixed-methods study. Generally, the data show that teachers experience a continuum of curricular supports (or lack thereof) as they begin their careers and that the gaps in curriculum supports for new teachers are widespread. In examining five specific missing curriculum cases, thematic trends emerged in relation to the specific challenges teachers ascribed to the experience. A summary of key findings are presented in Table 11 on the following page, and the implications of these findings for future curriculum research will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Table 12

Summary Table of Key Findings

Research Question	Findings
#1. To what extent do teachers experience a missing curriculum in their first year of teaching? (Quantitative Data)	• Missing curriculum experiences occurred across all contexts • Most teachers reported lacking important planning materials, clear expectations, *and* adequate training • Over 20% of respondents reported receiving little to no curriculum support at all. • Teachers starting their careers after 2018 reported slightly more positive curricular support.
#2. What are the specific challenges that new teachers ascribe to the experience of teaching without curriculum support? (Qualitative Data)	• New Teachers needed to invest significant amounts of personal time and money to supplement available curriculum resources. • New teachers experienced high levels of physical and emotional stress in relation to their missing curriculum experience.

Table 12 (Continued)

#3. What structural shortfalls in the onboarding process contributed to the missing curriculum experience? (Qualitative Data)	• Limited, low-quality, or nonexistent instructional materials provided the basis for the missing curriculum phenomenon. • A rushed onboarding experience negatively contributed to teachers ability to feel prepared for the new school year. • The absence of curriculum-related training was the most widely reported missing support. • Unclear expectations and limited organizational leadership undermined teachers' ability to understand their course goals. Isolation, lack of human supports, and the discouragement of collaboration contributed to teachers' ongoing curricular challenges.
#4. How do teachers explain the impact of the missing curriculum experience on their pedagogical development and student learning? (Qualitative Data)	• Teachers' perceptions of their missing curriculum experience on students varied: some saw negative effects while others felt called to shelter students from negative effects. • Teachers perceived that their missing curriculum experience had a career-shaping impact on them. While each admitted harmful outcomes in-the-moment, each also felt this experience made them a stronger teacher. Four out of five interviewed teachers rose to either teacher leadership or district leadership roles.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

When new teachers join the field of education they often experience a steep learning curve as they dive into their new school environments and begin learning the craft of pedagogy. Of course, one of new teachers' primary concerns is their ability to serve their students well by providing a quality education, aiming to help their students reach the learning outcomes established by the course curriculum. However, some new teachers begin their careers with no support whatsoever in relation to this fundamental aspect of their role. When new teachers begin their career without clear expectations about *what to teach*, without any instructional or organizational materials, and without any training to support their curricular goals, this study terms that experience as the *missing curriculum phenomenon*.

At its core, this study's goal was to shine a light on the existence of this curricular hardship for new teachers. While both the desperate need for a strong new teacher pipeline *and* the high burnout rate for new teachers are well-documented, existing research rarely envisions curriculum as a meaningful support simply because the curriculum is most often assumed to *exist*. Drawing from my own classroom teaching experiences and shared stories with colleagues, I launched this study to better understand how often new teachers find themselves within missing curriculum experiences and, when they do, what impact it can have on their teaching careers.

Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, this study sought to explore four specific research questions. In phase one of the study, a survey administered to practicing teachers to collect data related to research question one: (1) *to what extent do teachers experience a missing curriculum in their first year of teaching*? In phase two, follow-up interviews were conducted with the survey participants whose responses indicated they had experienced the most severe examples of the missing curriculum phenomenon. These interviews

focused on the three remaining interview questions: (2) *what are the specific challenges that teachers ascribe to the experience of teaching without curriculum support*, (3) *what structural shortfalls in the onboarding process contributed to the missing curriculum experience*, and (4) *how do teachers explain the impact of the missing curriculum experience on their pedagogical development and, ultimately, student learning?*

This chapter interprets the study's key findings, as presented in Chapter 4, in relation to the original research questions. The section begins with academic discussion around the four research questions, relating this study's findings to the existing body of literature discussed in Chapter 2. Next, I discuss the practical implications of the findings from multiple perspectives, including for policy-makers, administrators, and teachers themselves. The chapter and the dissertation conclude with a discussion of the study's limitations and delimitations as well as my recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Key Findings

This study carries forward a thread of research that brings awareness to the plight of new teachers, acknowledges the reality of burnout in the teaching profession, and explores potential supports to strengthen the likelihood of success for those entering the field. Similar to cases documented by Kauffman et al. (2002), Fry (2010), and McCann and Johannessen (2004), this study shows clear cases in the field of significant levels of challenge for first year teachers in the absence of curriculum materials and support. When new teachers are required to teach in such conditions, scrambling from lesson to lesson without clear directives, there are adverse outcomes for both students and teachers. The following sections are framed as responses to each of the four research questions, discussing key findings in relation to existing research before transitioning into practical recommendations for the field of education.

Research Question 1: The Missing Curriculum Is Real

First and foremost, this study's results show that the missing curriculum phenomenon is an experience that many teachers can identify with in the surveyed community. In relation to the frequency of the missing curriculum phenomenon, over 20% (n=28) of the sample survey met the general description for a missing curriculum experience, indicating that they had little to no curriculum support in their first year of teaching. Beyond this subset who experienced the most extreme lack of curriculum, teachers' experiences portrayed a continuum of varied levels of curriculum support and access (or lack thereof). While there are certainly teachers who reported high levels of support, the *majority* of teachers reported negative perceptions of both the quality *and* the amount of resources received on nearly every response item.

To suggest that at least one in five of new teachers enters the field with no curricular support whatsoever and three in five have a negative perception of the supports they did receive is certainly striking. However, these findings affirm the results of other recent research on the topic of curriculum quality. For example, the Tennessee Department of Education (2019) found that 40% of teachers surveyed in their state did not feel that they had access to quality instructional materials and 50% felt similarly regarding assessment materials. Smeaton and Waters (2013) and Educators for Excellence (2021) observed similar statistics, with ranges between 40% and 60% of teachers reporting that they did not have access to certain types of instructional and assessment materials.

Cases of missing curriculum experiences were observed across all school types and contexts and all academic disciplines, suggesting the likelihood of a missing curriculum experience may be more of a function of internal school processes than contextual demographics. That being said, there is certainly additional opportunity to investigate potential correlations between demographic factors and teachers attitudes towards curriculum resources and support.

Existing research identifies that urban schools that serve higher rates of minority populations as well as higher populations of students living in poverty are often more prone to curriculum-related challenges (e.g., Educators for Excellence, 2021; Johnson et al., 2004; Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). For example, Johnson et al. (2004) have already identified a curricular "support gap" for teachers in schools that serve low-income populations. Additionally, it is important to consider that the *impact* of missing curriculum experiences may differ depending on environment for both teachers and students as the challenges of a missing curriculum may interact with other factors that present at certain school types.

One unpredicted frequency statistic was that teachers who *currently* identify as new teachers (those beginning their career in 2018 or sooner) were not quite as critical of their curriculum resources as their colleagues with more experience. This group trended more positively in their reflections than teachers with more experience, and none of the them responded with the lowest rating for their general level of curriculum support. Still, over 20% (n=7) of teachers in this experience range responded with the *second*-lowest rating, suggesting that, despite a positive shift, there was still a wide range of missing curricular supports. In this particular subset of teachers, 40% at least somewhat rejected that they had access to planning materials (*n=12*), quality materials (*n=14*), or clear expectations (*n=14*). Moreover, 70% (*n=21*) at least somewhat rejected that they received curriculum-related training and over 50% (*n=16*) rejected that they were shown how to access existing materials.

However, In the wake of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and all of the disruptions to public education that followed, this finding was certainly unexpected. There are many potential explanations for this observation. Perhaps teachers' attitudes towards the beginning of their career change over time, with new teachers feeling more forgiving and more experienced teachers bringing a more critical eye. It is possible that the upheaval of schools' curriculum

practices during the No Child Left Behind era and the conversion to Common Core represented a peak of the missing curriculum phenomenon (see Schmoker & Marzano, 1999). It is also possible that, despite the challenges of adapting to teaching during a pandemic, the amount of work schools did to prepare for virtual instruction alongside the implementation of digital learning management systems constituted a positive shift in curricular support in the post-COVID educational landscape. More pessimistically, it is also important to remember that this study's structure only made contact with those teachers who decided to remain in the field, and the missing curriculum data associated with those who quit is impossible to gauge.

Overall, while there was some variation observed in the *severity* of missing curriculum cases in different demographic subsets, this study finds a high degree of missing curriculum materials and curriculum-related support *in general*. It is important to remember that, in this study, the scale that was used measured extremes, where a rating of "1" represented a total lack of any material or support. In light of this, even mid-range responses likely indicate that important materials are lacking particular components or are not meeting teachers' expectations of quality. These findings affirm other recent studies highlighting that roughly half of all teachers voice concern over the quality of their provided curriculum materials (see above for Educators for Excellence, 2021; National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2020; Tennessee Department of Education, 2019).

Research Question 2: The Hardships of the Missing Curriculum

Missing curriculum experiences create significant challenges for those who live them. Without provided instructional materials, teachers must either source or create their own in order to have functional lessons for class each day. One of the most shocking discoveries was learning just how much personal time, effort, and resources teachers dedicated just to this one task. These findings affirmed the work of Smeaton and Waters (2013) that showed the significant level of

time new teachers' needed to dedicate towards lesson planning. Similar to observations of Kauffman et al. (2017), Opfer et al. (2017), and Blazar et al. (2019), much of this time was spent creating materials completely from scratch.

In the survey, nearly one-third of new teachers reported spending an additional 10 or more hours per week preparing lessons and just over 30% reported they often spent personal funds to support their classroom. In the interviews, teachers described arriving to work early, leaving late, and working weekends. In all cases, the required workload began to dominate other aspects of life, resulting in teachers opting out of social gatherings, sacrificing family time, and feeling overworked and overwhelmed. In a profession where compensation is often a central issue, these statistics are particularly troubling as they highlight the embedded hours of at-home work within the salary structure while also constituting a financial *cost* for teachers to successfully complete their job expectations.

Beyond these economic impacts for teachers, there was a very real personal toll associated with a missing curriculum experience. In the absence of clear expectations and in the midst of a confusing environment, teachers often found themselves doubting their job performance and their abilities. Mirroring cases reported by both McCann and Johannessen (2004) and Fry (2010), teachers' persistent feelings of fear and failure compounded into high levels of stress. Of the five teachers interviewed, one described their missing curriculum experience as a contributing factor to their need to seek professional mental health support, another referenced it as a contributing factor to their divorce, and another described daily fits of crying because she "hated [her] job so much." Job-related stress and/or anxiety was a major factor that presented in every interview, and one respondent even developed a diagnosed heart condition that required medication from the stress of his job.

These are the same types of feelings that Ingersoll et al. (2014) document as contributing factors to new teacher burnout. Simply put, these costs are too much to ask of teachers. One of the most important outcomes of this study is to put cases like this into the spotlight. While I disclosed my own experience with a missing curriculum in Chapter 3, the findings of this study show that other cases are not uncommon in the field, and the human impact of such experiences are beyond what could appropriately be expected of an employee. In recognition of the human resources of the teaching profession, there is opportunity to recognize the material components of the teaching curriculum as an important new teacher support.

Research Question 3: The Structures that Promote a Missing Curriculum

One of the most important goals of this study was to try to identify school structures that contribute to missing curriculum experiences so that future research might target those systems for further development. When underdeveloped school systems contribute to systemic challenges, there are often tangible steps policy-makers and school leadership teams can take to help support the issue. In this study, several environmental components appeared to be common across missing curriculum experiences that undermined teachers' ability to establish and deliver a quality curriculum.

A Need for Curriculum Maintenance Systems

Overall, this study's findings echoed those of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2020) and the Tennessee Department of Education (2019) that showed that many teachers do not feel as if they have access to quality curriculum materials. The overriding trait associated with each missing curriculum experience was that the schools that each teacher served lacked formal ways for procuring, maintaining, *and* organizing the curriculum. No school had an inventory of what curriculum materials existed or where they were located. Often times teachers found themselves randomly discovering materials that had at one point been purchased by the

school district; other times teachers found out years later that materials had existed that they simply did not know about.

It also appeared that these schools had not dedicated adequate resources to the maintenance of their curriculum materials. District provided materials that were available were often dated and of poor quality. Teachers found themselves working with textbooks that had been purchased decades prior, and teachers were often encouraged by school leadership to reference free materials on the internet in support of their curriculum development. As one case example of material quality, Maria felt the resources she had access to were not only insufficient, but were also *inappropriate* for her students, as she only had access to cowboy-themed Western novels from the 1960s to share with students in an urban, primarily Hispanic school community. While each teacher felt like they were lacking important instructional materials, no teacher was aware of any established process to procure new materials through the school budget.

The type of materials provided to teachers in missing curriculum environments tended to fall into two categories: (1) textbooks or novels provided by the district and/or (2) an assortment of teacher-created instructional materials shared in good faith from another teacher. Instructional materials, like textbooks, assignments, and worksheets, seemed to be the most widely provided materials in the county, with over 60% of teachers at least somewhat agreeing that their district provided these types of resources. Similar to the findings of Smeaton and Waters (2013), assessments, like tests, quizzes, or projects, were significantly less likely to be provided with over 60% at least somewhat denying that their district made those resources available. What the interviews helped contextualize was that, while these resources were sometimes received, they were often ad hoc, jumbled, and incoherent, requiring considerable *reworking* by the new teacher in order for them to be used at all.

What was lacking most of all was organization. No teacher who was interviewed was afforded any sort of documented *plan* in relation to their curriculum goals. Course organization documents just did not exist; there were no course maps, no scope and sequence charts, no pacing guides, and no syllabi. In one case, the teacher was not even able to locate a written course description or a course catalogue of classes offered within the school district. Survey data echoed these results, with the highest amount of teachers (64.3%) at least somewhat rejecting that their school provided these types of resources in their first year. While teachers certainly reported a heavy burden associated with creating materials from scratch, the lack of these organizational materials were what created the most stress – teachers felt *unable* to create materials because they just did not know what they should even be about.

A Need for Intentional Onboarding

Another commonality participants shared was that they had very little time to prepare for their jobs from the point of hire. Affirming both the work of Johnson et al. (2004) and Liu and Johnson (2006) documenting the negative impact of rushed educator hiring practices, each of the teachers interviewed reported they were hired in last-minute fashion. Moreover, two of them had not even entered their school building until the week before school started and two of them also experienced assignment changes within their first year of teaching. With such a limited timeline before teachers are in front of students, there is simply no time to prepare.

The immediacy of this timeline limited teachers' opportunity to receive curriculum support or training before needing to actually operationalize curriculum *with students present*. None of the teachers interviewed reported receiving any quality training related to how they should approach their classrooms pedagogically or what goals they should pursue with students. Instead, teachers reported receiving either "all staff" training on topics completely separate from teaching and learning or no training at all. For example, one teacher related that the main focus

of the training she received before school started was how to detect drugs on campus. None of the participants reported receiving any training that was specific to new teachers. More broadly, training was identified as a general weakness for new teachers, receiving *the lowest* perception ratings in the survey with over 80% at least somewhat rejecting the notion that they were trained to use their materials and over 70% at least somewhat rejecting the notion that they felt prepared to start the school year because of the training they received. Affirming the work of Handler (2010), Carl (2014), and Blazar et al. (2019), these findings suggest that curriculum *training* is actually the most likely component to be absent in a missing curriculum experience, often hindering teachers' ability to use curriculum materials that may actually be present in the classroom.

This limited preparation window also hampered teachers' ability to meet with other teachers who had taught the course previously and/or exchange materials. Complicating matters further, teachers in missing curriculum environments were often entering positions that either had not existed previously or were in the midst of some sort of hostile transition. Without any opportunity for a sort of material 'handoff,' teachers were left to fend for themselves in relation to every aspect of the curriculum. In this scenario, lacking both guidance and any real work experience, teachers relied on their college of education training and their own intuition, leading to highly individualized teaching experiences, dependent on each teacher's personality, attitude, and intrinsic ability.

A Need for Human Supports

In the absence of a material foundation and in the haste of starting the new position, one of the supports new teachers craved most was a colleague to confide in. When describing *what* was most helpful to their efforts, teachers often supplied a *who* in response, sharing the importance of the one colleague who had their back in times of need. Often times, this person

was not within their team or even their content area; support people included the school librarian, a colleague at another building, a college professor, and practitioners they met in online teaching communities. The survey data showed that collegial support was *the* area teachers felt most confident about, with nearly 25% stating it was completely true that they were connected to colleagues who could support them, over 30% stating it was completely true that they regularly collaborated with colleagues on curricular decision-making, and nearly 44% stating it was completely true that they could identify colleagues who were ready and willing to help. These statistics were *by far* the strongest numbers in the "completely true" category.

Despite teachers' favorable attitudes toward the collegial support they received overall, in the case of teachers experiencing a missing curriculum, human support was often a support that was not available. Teachers reported strong feelings of isolation, and they described physical and systemic barriers that prevented them from connecting with colleagues in a productive way. Often, these teachers were tucked away in remote parts of the school building. Sometimes the workload prevented them from making time for human connections. Other times, the cultural environment of the school seemed to spurn collaboration, with teachers describing interactions with teammates that left them feeling "called out," "shut down," and embarrassed.

The formal structures that were intended to support teaching and learning were often absent or unproductive. While some had grade-level or content area teams they could meet with, teachers described meetings that were infrequent and often more about venting than constructive work. For example, in Lynn's case, she recalled meeting with her social studies team only three times throughout the entire school year, and she compared the grade-level PLC she participated in as "just like the teachers' lounge where they were just bashing kids all the time." In these environments, the lack of fidelity to productive collaboration meant the very systems that were intended to support curriculum collaboration actually proved *harmful*.

Mentors, which were legally required by the state for each of these teachers, were also in short supply. Three of the five teachers had no mentor assigned at all. Of the remaining two, one was provided a mentor that was legally non-compliant because they were also a new teacher, and the other was provided a mentor she rarely met with and who told her she could "do whatever we want." Over half of teachers surveyed at least somewhat rejected the statement that a district-provided mentor offered regular support to their practice. To me, this finding was significant: the state has *already* recognized that mentors are an important aspect of new teacher support to the degree that it is *mandated*; however, it appears that districts are frequently failing to make this support available to new teachers. At a minimum, school districts must be held accountable to providing existing required supports to the new teachers they bring on board.

The majority of research focusing on new teacher retention focuses on the importance of these types of human supports. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2004), Public Education Network (2004), and Wong (2005) all advocate for the use of mentor teachers as part of a comprehensive induction process, as these types of collegial relationships have been shown to have a positive effect on the skill development of new teachers, including their instructional abilities and understanding of content expectations. The findings of this study underscore the potential harms that can occur if these supports are not present.

A Need for Capable Leaders

The other area of structural shortfall was the absence of strong curricular leadership at the school level. In *each* of the missing curriculum cases, the school districts were in the midst of leadership upheaval. Teachers described principals and curriculum directors who had been "asked to resign" the previous year or who were vocal about their plans to leave the district. In Steve's case, the district had been cycling school leadership for many years in a row. Similar to

the chaotic handoffs observed with teacher-level turnover, when district leadership is in transition, it appears difficult to maintain school systems with high levels of fidelity.

Teachers were often critical of the roles school leadership played in relation to their daily job duties. Like the findings of Public Education Network (2004), teachers were more likely to voice frustration regarding their administration than trust and respect. To Rachel and Lynn, leadership was viewed as an obstacle, actually impeding the work and undermining the teacher's intentions. For Steve and Kim, leadership was positive and friendly but failed to provide any tangible support beyond ad hoc statements of "you got this!" For Maria, school leadership was just too busy "putting out fires" to support her at the classroom level. The survey showed that teachers generally were critical of school leadership's curricular ability, with over 30% stating it was not at all true that administrators were competent in their subject area and nearly 70% rejecting that notion at least to some degree. In this light, teachers were often dismissive of what little feedback they did receive from their supervisors.

What teachers craved most from their school-level leadership were clear expectations. Similar to the findings related to teachers' desire for organizational materials and the findings of Smeaton and Waters (2013), what new teachers were always in search of was *direction* and *purpose*. In the cases documented by McCann and Johannessen (2004) and Fry (2010), the lack of expectations from administration constituted one of the most significant stressors of the job. In the cases in this study, teachers reported the only job expectation that they received was simply a course title; "We're hiring you for the 7th grade English teaching position" was a standard frame that constituted the *only* teaching expectations that these teachers received. The survey data confirmed that this is another curriculum support that is widely lacking; over 70% of teachers at least somewhat rejected the idea that they received clear expectations on how to successfully approach their teaching duties.

In reflection, what teachers wanted were more detailed descriptions of *how to fulfill* course expectations. While physical materials represented a tangible need for teachers, clear expectations represented an intangible that was in many ways just as important. In this light, clear expectations serve as an affirmation for teachers, ensuring that they are indeed performing the *right* work and eliminating the doubt stemming from their lack of experience.

Research Question 4: The Outcomes of Teaching to the Missing Curriculum

While the personal impact of teaching to the missing curriculum is easily detectable in the participant narratives, other impacts are more difficult to ascertain from teacher perceptions. In terms of pedagogy, teachers had mixed impressions of how the missing curriculum affected their instructional practices and, ultimately, their students. Lynn and Kim both felt hampered by the lack of materials and lack of guidance. They saw their teaching as robotic and "boring", and they worried that they had not served their students well. Conversely, Rachel, Steve, and Maria, felt that, by virtue of their own dedication and hard work, they were able to hold things together for the sake of the students. In some ways, it seemed that these three teachers felt that they had an obligation to save their students from the status quo; as new teachers, they recognized the system was not working, and they felt like they were able to do better than what they saw across the organization.

Despite these teacher perceptions, this study's design did not gather any actual achievement measures related to student performance. Certainly, the existing body or research shows a clear linkage between the quality of curriculum materials and student outcomes (e.g., Borman et al., 2008; Bhatt & Koedel, 2012; Bjorklund-Young, 2016; Koedel & Polikoff, 2017; Springfield et al., 2000). While some of the teachers interviewed in this study *believed* they were able to hide their challenges from their students, it is highly likely that student outcomes may have stunted by these teachers' lack of curriculum support.

What was clear in all cases was that the missing curriculum experience left a mark on each teacher. Teachers talked with strong, negative emotions in relation to that time of their professional careers, and none of them wished to relive this phase of their life. Kim, Rachel, and Steve said specifically that they *would not* be able to repeat this experience; the toll was simply too much. Lynn shared that her experience left her with a permanent mistrust of school leadership

However, one unpredicted discovery was that each of the interviewed teachers also described *positive* professional outcomes in relation to their difficult year. In many ways, teachers saw their missing curriculum experience as a major contributor to *why* they are a strong teacher today. It was almost like they viewed this experience as a proving ground – a sort of test to see who was really cut out to be a good teacher. They saw themselves as more independent, more capable, more knowledgeable, and more creative because of the difficult learning curve they had to adapt to and the skillset they were forced to acquire. Even more interesting, of the five teachers interviewed, four had risen to curriculum leadership in some capacity, and they referenced their trial-by-fire first year as a major motivator that led them to pursue advanced degrees. While this finding relates to my own path as well, and, indeed the motivation for this dissertation, it was encouraging to hear the voice of teachers who were passionate about improving their local curricular context for the next generation of teachers and students.

In their interviews, these teachers shared a sense that they had *made it* and that they were now in education for the long-haul. Yet, while each could cite the growth they achieved out of their experience, they were cautious to advise their pathway to others. What I worry about most is the level of doubt that these teachers described in that first year, wondering whether or not they could be successful teachers. The burnout rates for new teachers are well-documented (see Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), and these teachers were at-risk by their own admission. Quitting

completely was on three of their minds, and Lynn actually did after fulfilling her one-year contract. Certainly, these teachers represent success stories, prevailing over the missing curriculum, but I am both curious and cautious about the potential stories that may exist that this study's design was not able to capture.

Summary of Findings in Relation to Existing Research

This study's findings generally supports the small but growing body of literature exploring the curriculum support gaps for new teachers. In affirmation of existing research, this study found that many teachers in a wide range of contexts begin their careers without access to important instructional materials, without clear curriculum expectations, and without any access to curriculum-related training or support. The absence of these components required teachers to dedicate significant amounts of personal time and resources to their jobs and also contributed to the development of negative feelings in the workplace, including isolation, anxiety, fear, and stress. Common factors that were observed in each missing curriculum case included a rushed onboarding experience, the absence of instructional materials, unclear expectations, inconsistent leadership approaches, and isolation from colleagues.

There were also several findings that were unique to this study. While all demographics of teachers showed considerable need for more material support, survey results seemed to suggest that teachers who began their career *after* 2018 had more positive perceptions of their curriculum support than those who started in earlier time periods. There are many potential explanations for this outcome, including possible changes in teacher perception of time or the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the industry of education. These findings are explored further in Recommendations for Future Research section below.

Another new finding was that teachers who experienced the most severe cases of the missing curriculum phenomenon tended to view their experience as a career-shaping endeavor.

While no teacher *enjoyed* the experience, each was able to cite concrete ways that their missing curriculum experience had made them a stronger teacher, and, to a degree, these teachers felt that the missing curriculum experience was a sort of rite of passage. These teachers felt that the need to develop the curriculum on their own made them more self-reliant, more creative, and, ultimately, a more *skilled* teacher. Of the five interview participants, four of them had grown in their roles to be directly involved in curriculum work in their school districts.

What I believe is most important about this study's results is that it positions the curriculum itself within the scope of research on new teacher retention. While much work has been done to showcase the stressors affecting new teachers and the high likelihood of burnout, the majority of that work focuses on other job-related challenges and other types of solutions. Citing the testimony of the teachers in this study, there is a need for the curriculum itself to be considered as a meaningful new teacher support alongside other important pillars, like the use of mentor teachers and new teacher induction programs. Table 12 below provides an overarching crosswalk table of this study's findings in relation to existing literature.

Table 13

Crosswalk Table of Key Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

My Findings	Related Literature
Most teachers reported lacking at least some materials, expectations, *and* adequate training. Limited, low-quality, or nonexistent instructional materials provided the basis for the missing curriculum phenomenon. (Research Questions 1 & 3)	Supports Smeaton and Waters (2013), Tennessee Department of Education (2019), National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (2020), and Educators for Excellence (2021), who find large gaps in available curricular supports and low levels of curriculum quality.
Over 20% of respondents reported receiving little to no curriculum support at all. (Research Question 1)	Supports Kauffman et al. (2002), McCann and Johannessen (2004), and Fry (2010), who also document cases of complete missing curriculum.

Table 13 (continued)

Missing curriculum experiences occurred across all school contexts. (Research Question 1)	Johnson et al. (2004), Opfer et al. (2017), Tennessee Department of Education (2019) all find that schools serving high rates of poverty tend to have fewer curricular supports for teachers
New Teachers needed to invest significant amounts of personal time and money to supplement available curriculum resources. (Research Question 2)	Supports Smeaton and Waters (2013), who document large amounts of time dedicated to lesson planning. Also supports Opfer et al. (2017), Kauffman et al. (2017), and Blazar et al. (2019), who document the need for new teachers to create materials from scratch.
New teachers experienced high levels of physical and emotional stress in relation to their missing curriculum experience. (Research Question 2)	Supports McCann and Johannessen (2004) and Fry (2010), who document new teacher cases of stress and anxiety in relation to curriculum planning. Also supports Ingersoll et al. (2014), who cite the job demands on new teachers as a leading reason for new teacher burnout.
A rushed onboarding experience negatively contributed to teachers ability to feel prepared for the new school year. (Research Question 3)	Supports Johnson et al. (2004) and Liu and Johnson (2006), who document the negative effects of rapid onboarding.
The absence of curriculum-related training was the most widely reported missing support. (Research Question 3)	Supports Handler (2010), who documents a lack of curriculum-focused training in colleges of education. Also supports Carl (2014) and Blazar et al. (2019), who document a lack of curriculum-focused on-the-job training for teachers
Unclear expectations and limited organizational leadership undermined teachers' ability to understand their course goals. (Research Question 3)	Supports McCann and Johannessen (2004) and Smeaton and Waters (2013), who found that unclear expectations added to new teachers' stress. Also supports Public Education Network (2004), who found that leadership sometimes undermined new teachers curricular efforts.

Table 13 (continued)

Isolation, lack of human supports, and the discouragement of collaboration contributed to teachers' ongoing curricular challenges. (Research Question 3)	Supports Wong (2003), Alliance for Excellent Education (2004), Ingersoll and Smith (2004), Public Education Network (2004), Wong (2004), and Wong (2005), who call for teachers to be supported by mentor teachers, professional learning communities, and new teacher induction programs.
Teachers' perceptions of their missing curriculum experience on students varied: some saw negative effects while others felt called to shelter students from negative effects. (Research Question 4)	Springfield et al. (2000), Borman et al. (2008), Bhatt and Koedel (2012), Bjorklund-Young (2016), and Koedel and Polikoff (2017) all show that curriculum quality has a direct impact on student outcomes.
Teachers starting their careers after 2018 reported slightly more positive curricular support. (Research Question 1)	New finding – requires additional investigation
Teachers perceived that their missing curriculum experience had a career-shaping impact on them. While each admitted harmful outcomes in-the-moment, each also felt this experience made them a stronger teacher. Four out of five interviewed teachers rose to either teacher leadership or district leadership roles. (Research Question 4)	New finding – requires additional investigation

Implications for Practice and Recommendations

One of the main goals of this project was simply to show that missing curriculum experiences *exist* and to enter the stories of teachers who have lived it into the research record. I believe the data from both the county-wide survey and the practitioner interviews give evidence to support that goal. Most importantly, once a challenge is recognized, it can then be targeted for systematic improvement. In this section, I discuss the practical implications based on this study's findings and propose potential steps that stakeholders might consider to prevent missing curriculum experiences for future new teachers.

District-Level Curriculum Management

One of the most important findings of this study is that it affirms that *many* new teachers enter the field without access to adequate curriculum materials to support their teaching. In some cases, districts had failed to maintain acquired resources, allowing them to get lost or fall into disrepair. In other cases, course materials seemed to disappear in the exchange of course ownership from one teacher to another. Other times, turnover in school leadership eroded school systems, allowing for curriculum to be neglected *systematically*. Whatever the cause, the absence of course curriculum materials created undue job-related burdens for teachers that impacted both their teaching ability and their personal lives.

In order to prevent missing curriculum experiences and support new teachers with course instruction, districts *must* have systems in place for curriculum management. Indeed, curriculum serves a prerequisite to the majority of the work of schools, and researchers like Springfield et al. (2000) and Palombo (2003) have shown the importance of having *any curriculum* in place, regardless of the specific materials used. Written processes for curriculum material procurement and material review are critically important to both sustaining curriculum infrastructure as well as assisting members of the school team in navigating curriculum-related issues. Having a plan in place to account for curriculum materials also ensures that there is sufficient budget outlay dedicated to instructional materials in the annual budget, ensuring that resources stay up-to-date across the district. Teachers in this study referenced digital resources, like cloud storage or school-wide Learning Management Systems, as effective ways for schools to store and organize curriculum resources in the modern era.

It is also important that districts implement safeguards for curriculum loss prevention – some of the most heartbreaking narratives in this study come from those who found materials stashed away in closets that teachers had no idea actually existed. For example, when Steve

found his digital resources stuck to the inside of a file cabinet, the only explanation for such an occurrence is material neglect. Simple measures, like creating inventories of existing materials, gathering material counts on a regular basis, and mapping the location of materials in a systematic way can help prevent scenarios like this. Regarding digital resources, districts might consider using cloud- or server-based storage systems, specifying digital file folder organization conventions, or requiring frequent back-ups of curriculum materials.

Based on the findings of this study, there are specific *types* of resources that districts should prioritize as they hone their efforts on developing and preserving the curriculum. While teachers appreciated having resources like textbooks and sample assignments, they felt much more comfortable sourcing those documents on their own. However, without any organizational materials to guide their efforts, teachers often felt unsure of what they should be searching for.

What teachers craved most were the materials that would help organize and give direction to their work. Documents commonly referred to as 'course maps' or 'scope and sequence' guides provide teachers with a schema for the course(s) they are charged to teach. For example, these resources might explain (1) what is to be taught in a unit, (2) how much time should be spent on a particular concept, and/or (3) what order certain lessons should be taught in. Similarly, the survey exposed assessments as one of the curriculum items that was most often missing. In the interviews, teachers expressed doubt in their ability to build quality assessments while they were also unsure of what to actually teach. These are the same types of materials advocated for in Public Education Network's (2004) new teacher resource "wish list" (p. 30). As districts consider what types of materials to prioritize for new teachers, organizational documents and assessments should rise to the top of the list.

Curriculum as a Component of Training, Hiring, and Onboarding

Based on the findings of this study, I aim to make the case that the curriculum itself can be considered as an important support for new teachers alongside other well-documented interventions in the body of research on new teacher retention. Along the pathway from preservice teaching through the first years of owning a classroom, there are many opportunities to support new teachers in regards to their curriculum use and development.

Before teachers even enter their first classrooms, it is important to think about how to prepare them for the curriculum demands that they will likely meet in the field. For colleges of education preparing the next generation of teachers, Handler's (2010) call for less theory and more practicum seems relevant to better support new teachers abilities for curriculum implementation and design. Based on the findings of this study, messaging to make preservice teachers aware that they may be required to source materials on their own or build them entirely from scratch might have been helpful. Recognizing this reality, preservice teachers could be trained to effectively lesson plan, to coordinate lessons into units in, to evaluate materials for quality, and to design instructional materials.

There is also opportunity to continue this type of focused training once teachers are hired by districts as part of a broader induction program. When teachers join a school, they often participate in at least some job training before the school year begins. However, this training often focuses more on generalized tasks, like learning how to use student information systems for taking attendance and tracking grades, rather than on *how to teach* (Blazar et al., 2019). Studies have already confirmed that curriculum-focused professional development can positively impact teachers classroom ability (e.g., Paik et al., 2011; Taylor, 2013). In the case of new teachers, it is so important to remember that when they begin their first year of teaching, it is often their *first* experience with an actual course, and they have never yet had to consider the

breadth of a yearlong curriculum in its entirety. As the course curriculum represents one of the main purposes of a teacher's role, they should also be trained on the district's goals for the course, how to achieve them, and what resources to use in the process.

Fortunately, there are *already* well-researched structures that can effectively support new teachers in this way. Induction programs, like those advocated by Wong (2005) and Public Education Network (2004), can create professional learning opportunities specific to new teachers before a school year begins and throughout the first years of instruction. Based on the challenges of the teachers highlighted in this study, I argue that there might be considerable benefit to including curriculum as a core component of these targeted development programs.

Additionally, pairing novice teachers with mentor teachers is widely accepted as a productive support for new teachers (e.g., Goldrick, 2016; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Wong, 2005;). Moreover, mentor teachers, especially those with experience in the same content area as their mentee, are well-positioned to support new teachers with course curriculum. What is unfortunate, is that these programs are not universal, nor are they often implemented with fidelity. Of the five teachers interviewed for this study, none of them experienced any specific training for new teachers nor did any of them experience a productive mentor pairing, even though *both* are required by statute in the state where they launched their careers. In order to adequately support the new teachers they hire, districts simply must ensure that required practices are enacted with fidelity and purpose.

Districts also have opportunities to aid new teachers with curriculum use by examining the structure of the hiring and onboarding process. One thing the teachers in this study had in common was that they were hired just before the start of the school year. In their cases, this limited time frame hampered their ability to feel ready for students. Just as Liu and Johnson (2006) have shown the challenges associated with late and/or rushed hiring, it is important to

recognize that the time period before classes begin is *valuable*. The earlier teachers can gain access to their classroom, their school building, their materials, and their colleagues, the sooner they can get to planning and preparation. As a general recommendation for human resources, districts should aim to hire for positions as soon as possible, and, once a candidate decision has been made, employee training and development should begin immediately thereafter.

It is in this time period, districts have an important opportunity to intentionally coordinate material exchanges between teachers. What was lacking in the missing curriculum cases in this study was any sort of meaningful handoff from one course teacher to the next. When a teacher vacates a position, it is important to recognize that their experience in relation to the course curriculum is still tremendously valuable to the district and the next teacher of the course. If existing structures allow institutional knowledge to leave with the employee, years and years of productive work could be lost in each transition. Separate from the preservation of instructional materials, districts should consider how they might leverage *experience* in staffing transitions to support the incoming teacher.

Certainly, the circumstances around staffing are not always within a districts control, and districts will inevitably face situations that could not be planned for. Sometimes handoff meetings may not be possible in relation to hostile turnover. Sometimes late-summer resignations will force rapid onboarding timelines. In these cases, the cumulative effect of new teacher supports can be considered, and if one support cannot be offered, multiple overlapping supports may help insulate against any missing component of new teacher development. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) and the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) both advocate for multiple, overlapping new teacher supports. Also, it behooves districts to pre-plan for these types of situations. Districts ought to be asking questions like *how might we retain our curriculum infrastructure if this teacher leaves*, *who might serve as the curriculum point-person for a new*

teacher if no teacher is available, and/or *how might we provide training and support to a new teacher who has been hired after the start of the school year?*

Curriculum Policy and School District Responsibility

The results of this study raise significant policy questions regarding the scope of district responsibility in relation to curriculum maintenance and new teacher development. Already, it has been observed that statutory requirements in relation to educator supports are being neglected at the local level and unenforced at the state level. In light of these observations, educators and constituents alike must wonder *why are these important aspects of teaching and learning being overlooked?*

Another important curriculum-focused policy lever to consider is that of accreditation. In academia, accreditation is often the method by which curriculum is specified, reviewed, and improved. Accreditation also often serves as the mechanism by which a school's approach is *vetted* overall. In the state in which this study was conducted, accreditation is *also* required of all public schools. Citing the Revised School Code of 1976 (2006), "the department [of education] shall develop and distribute to all public schools proposed accreditation standards." Furthermore,

> "accredited" means certified by the superintendent of public instruction as having met or
>
> exceeded standards […] for 6 areas of school operation: administration and school
>
> organization, *curricula*, staff, school plant and facilities, school and community relations,
>
> and school improvement plans and student performance. (emphasis added)

However, the state's board of education has been consistently clear that it has no plans to implement what it considers to be "outdated" policy, and therefore the state has no existing accreditation program for public schools whatsoever (Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators, 2022). Certainly, accountability structures exist for standardized test scores,

fiscal responsibility, and state and federal programs, but the implications here are significant: there is very little oversight for schools in relation to *what is taught* or *how it is taught*.

Without the presence or any sort of external review, it is up to districts to audit their curriculum practices *on their own*. While there are perks to local control in terms of curricular customization, such a system inevitably results in considerable variation of practice from one school district to another. In this environment, there is opportunity for arbitrary influences to erode curriculum practices, including lack of expertise, distraction by other district priorities, or mismanagement of assets or funds. Just as new teachers can find themselves struggling without curriculum support, so too can districts. It is paramount that in the absence of any specified curriculum expectations provided by the state that districts develop clear messaging and clear expectations about curriculum *on their own*.

To Teachers: Practical Advice from Your Colleagues

I felt that it was appropriate to end the discussion of implications and recommendations with an appeal to new teachers based on the advice of those who lived the missing curriculum experience. In the current state of the educational landscape, it is likely that missing curriculum experiences, or at least curriculum deprived experiences, will persist, thus impacting those poised to enter field. For those teachers who may find themselves in a new school district without access to materials or support, it is important that they have strategies to help them *cope with* and *adapt to* that type of environment.

Perhaps the most striking details from the study's findings were those that gave voice to the personal wear and tear of teaching to a missing curriculum. For the teachers involved in this study, this first year in education included legitimate suffering, and that is truly unfortunate. While adapting to a new field, especially one as socially demanding as teaching, will likely demand hard work and some stress, new teachers *must* understand that sacrifices to basic health

and well-being *should not* be accepted pre-requisites of a job well done. Research on the stresses of teaching and the high burnout rates of new teachers has already exposed some of these factors in our field, but it is important to underscore that those factors can be exacerbated *or* mitigated by the type and quality of support present in the environment. In Lynn's case specifically, if she had not changed schools, it is likely that she would not have persisted in the field of education.

The most salient piece of advice that was echoed by all five interview participants was the imperative to find human support. While an absence of materials was the main trigger point for a missing curriculum experience, a supportive colleague-to-colleague relationship appeared to be the most appreciated remedy. In missing curriculum environments, this type of support was rarely available within the building, so it is important that new teachers seek this support *on their own*. Potential support networks might include former professors, teachers at other buildings or districts, or personnel from the county's intermediate school district.

The internet was widely referenced as an important resource for new teachers. Not only did *every* interviewed teacher turn to the web as their most common pathway for sourcing instructional materials, but it was also a common outreach tool to expand the support network. Teachers found significant value in online communities dedicated to their subject area and the craft of teaching. Specific educationally-focused bloggers served as mentor teachers to follow in lieu of actual district-assigned mentors on campus. For these reasons, it is important to consider how we prepare teachers to use technology in relation to their job. Educational technology is a rapidly expanding field, but it is often approached from the perspective of enhancing pedagogy. In light of the testimony of the teachers in this study, there may be value in expanding how we think about educational technology to include how teachers research content, evaluate digital resources, and network with colleagues across the field.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Reflections

At the completion of this study, it is important to reflect on the design decisions that impact the study's findings. I made several choices that were intended to support the richness of the data story but which also had limiting factors on the generalizability of this study. As my first true research endeavor, there were also several learning opportunities along the way that may give insight to future investigators using similar tools. In this section I discuss the research design choices that both impacted the study's findings as well as influence how the findings should be interpreted.

Limitations and Delimitations

First, from a professional lens, it was important to me to study the community that I serve, so that I might better understand the local curricular landscape and the needs of local teachers. Such a design is naturally bounded to the local demographics, and, while the community studied is demographically diverse, it is geographically constrained, limiting generalizability to other communities.

Additionally, the participant criteria cast an intentionally wide net on area teachers. While much curriculum research limits participants to a single content area, it was important to me to study *teachers' experiences* first and the curriculum (or lack thereof) second. I wanted to ensure the opportunity to hear missing curriculum experiences across the disciplines and in a variety of secondary settings. Generalizability again may be challenged since participants are not as narrowly defined as in other curriculum studies.

In these ways, there are aspects of this study that are in some ways too large and in other ways too narrow. It is this realization that contributed to the two-stage study approach, hoping that each stage would balance the other and provide an overall richness of data through its unique focus.

Reflections and Learning Opportunities

As my first true research endeavor, there were also some learning opportunities for me throughout the dissertation experience that I would revise for future studies. In an effort to strengthen the bounds of the survey population and ideally support the generalizability of the sample, I implemented fairly rigid functions in the survey build that moved candidates who did not meet one of the inclusion criteria immediately to the end of the survey. This choice had a significant impact on who I was able to gather data from, and, ultimately, the final sample size.

One factor I absolutely did not anticipate was just how many teachers began their careers out of state. While the survey was ultimately attempted by 227 respondents, all who were targeted because they were actively teaching in-state, only 168 could answer that they began their teaching career in state, thus closing out the survey. Similar skip functions related to subject area or school type reduced the final sample to roughly 60% of those who attempted to take the survey. I had completely underestimated just how much *movement* of teachers I would observe within the local educational context, and that had a limiting effect on the final data set. In future iterations of this type of research, I would instead omit the skip functions, leaving the survey open to gather data that may still be useful for the study's goals, and then use the study's boundaries to manually separate those responses that do not meet the inclusion criteria.

Perhaps the biggest blind spot in this survey's design is that its construct only allows for the inclusion of teachers who were still active in the field. Certain findings, like the motivating aspect of the missing curriculum experience or the general improvement of conditions over time, should be considered carefully in relation to this sample bias. For some of the respondents, it was clear that their experience had them carefully contemplating whether or not to continue teaching, and it is likely that there are important voices in this conversation that are wholly missing from this study's results because they have abandoned teaching altogether.

Environmental Factors

Contextually, it should also be acknowledged that the existing climate of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of this study may have impacted this study's implementation and its findings. Existing employment opportunities and the nature of teachers' work at the time of this study were very much in flux. In recent years, districts have been making major changes to how they deliver curriculum as they adapted to the constraints of remote learning, and new teachers' experiences with curriculum since 2020 is likely vastly different from pre-COVID-19 experiences. On one hand, it is possible that the rapid changes necessary to adapt to the environment may have eroded districts' curriculum efforts, similar to other periods of educational change; on the other, it is possible that the measures schools took to adapt to this crisis strengthened their infrastructure. It is also entirely possible that both of these outcomes are true, depending on the district.

<center>**Recommendations for Future Research**</center>

This study's primary goal was to expose a challenge in education often talked about amongst practitioners in the field but not widely discussed in academic literature. By shining more light on a problem, my hope is to contribute to a growing impetus to better our understanding of the curricular *reality* in public schools. Steiner's (2017) work already highlights the positive, cumulative impact that curriculum can theoretically have on student achievement, but it also acknowledges how little we know about the actual state of the curriculum in American schools. In this section, I make my own recommendations for future research based on this study's findings as well as affirm the recommendations of other researchers whose findings align with this work.

As it relates to the field of curriculum research, it is important to state that we cannot assume that curriculum exists on school campuses. While impact testing of specific curricula is

absolutely helpful when navigating curriculum adoption, researchers should also seek to identify the status quo of curriculum *in use* in schools. At present, it is simply not possible to know what resources are actually being used at particular schools, let alone *how* they are used, because no widespread curriculum data collection method exists. As recommended by O'Donnell (2008), future research documenting what materials school districts are purchasing as well as what materials districts have on-hand, including home built resources, could help define the typical curricular experience of teachers and students.

In this same vein, it is important for researches to strive to define what constitutes strong curriculum. Much research is dedicated to identifying the merits of specific tools, but there is still limited understanding of why one curriculum material might be more impactful than another. To this end, I lift up the recommendations of Chingos and Whitehurst (2012) and Taylor (2016), who call for more work to be done to specify what components add to the quality of curriculum materials. This work may lead to the refinement of curriculum design efforts, including the efforts of teachers who need to create curriculum resources on their own. Moreover, with so many teachers already incorporating found materials from the internet into their courses, teachers need to be equipped to discern and evaluate the quality of those resources.

Echoing the arguments of Whitehurst (2009), there is likely significant opportunity for curriculum policy to positively impact the overarching curriculum landscape. It is important to better understand how policy influences curriculum practices. At the district level, case studies that showcase productive curriculum practices would likely be helpful for schools who are looking to improve their existing model. Cross-district comparisons of how curriculum practices impact student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and other elements of the school environment could also prove helpful. At the state and federal level, the acknowledgement that states have huge variations in terms of curricular expectations is an important starting point. Better

understanding how legislation, oversight, and curricular *commonality* impact curriculum use and implementation could lead to targeted initiatives to support curriculum practices state-wide.

To fully understand the curriculum environment for new teachers, research designs that follow preservice teachers into their first jobs would be very insightful. Having a better understanding of the full range of what *current* teachers are experiencing when they enter the field would provide a more universal and nuanced image of the true curriculum landscape for new teachers. Research of this type could help provide deeper insight into the type of supports that could be arranged for teachers *in-the-moment*, promoting a stronger new teacher pipeline and a faster adoption of high impact curriculum materials and pedagogical skill.

Dissertation Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to document the existence of the missing curriculum phenomenon, which, in essence, is the experience of new teachers beginning their careers with little to no curriculum support. By investigating the frequency of this phenomenon and the lived experience of those who have faced it, I aimed to better understand the scope of impact a missing curriculum has on new teachers.

There are many, many dynamic factors that contribute to the curricular experience of teachers and students. The historical, theoretical, and practical forces impacting the modern curriculum landscape were explored throughout the literature review in Chapter 2. To investigate my four research questions, I used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from a local sample, as outlined in Chapter 3.

My findings support much of the existing literature about the importance of curriculum-related supports for new teachers. Overall, this study's findings that major curriculum support gaps exist for new teachers, with over 70% of participants reporting major gaps in the level of curriculum support they received and over 20% reporting that they received no curriculum

resources or support whatsoever. These missing curriculum experiences, characterized by a total lack of curriculum support, presented acute challenges for new teachers, including the need to dedicate significant personal resources to the job, high levels of job-related stress, and negative impacts on pedagogy. Additionally the absence of physical materials, rushed onboarding experiences, unclear expectations, lack of organizational leadership, and feelings of isolation were common factors across all missing curriculum experiences.

My study also documented some unique findings that appear to be new contributions to the research literature. First, I observed an unexpected, positive shift in perceptions of curriculum support for those teachers starting their careers *after* 2018. The reason for this shift remained unclear at the conclusion of the study and warrants additional investigation. Second, of the teachers identified for follow-up interviews, all five participants cited their missing curriculum experience as a motivating factor in their career. While they described the experience as unpleasant as well as harmful, they also saw it as a rite of passage, forging them into stronger teachers, and ultimately propelling four of them towards leadership positions. These findings were presented in detail in Chapter 4, and their implications were discussed throughout Chapter 5.

It is my hope that the findings of this study may motivate future research that helps support both the experience of new teachers and the curriculum work of schools. The curriculum itself represents a foundational component of a quality educational program, and, in its absence it is impossible for educators to target planned achievement goals for students. Those most prone to the harmful effects of a missing curriculum are new teachers, who lack both experiential knowledge and legacy materials to draw from. It is in this light that the curriculum itself may be considered as a worthy focus of future new teacher induction research as it provides a functional roadmap for teachers to use as they plan for each instructional day.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, & Technology

You are invited to participate in a research study titled *"Teaching without a roadmap: A mixed methods study of new teachers' experience with a missing curriculum".* The study is designed to help the researchers understand the type of resources middle and high school teachers typically receive and the level of professional support they experience when starting a new teaching position.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey. Your replies will be completely anonymous, unless you choose to share any identifying information, and no identifying information will be made public under any circumstances.

The survey will take approximately 7-10 minutes to complete. You may choose to not answer any question.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact Dr. LaSonja Roberts at lasonja.roberts@wmich.edu or Chris Williams at christopher.r.williams@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research and Innovation at 269-387-8298.
This study was approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on May 16, 2023.

Participating in this survey indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you do not want to participate, simply exit the survey now.

Start of Block: Demographics

Q1 Was your first year of teaching completed in a middle school or high school in the state of Michigan (serving grades 7-12)?

○   Yes (1)

○   No (2)

- -

Q2 How many years of teaching experience do you have?

▼ 1 - 5 years (1) ... More than 20 years (5)

- -

Q3 In what year did you start teaching?

_____

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: First Year of Teaching

First Teaching Year

The following questions focus on your very first year of teaching at the middle or high school level. Please answer all questions in this section with your first year of professional teaching in mind.

Q4 In your first year of professional teaching, what subjects did you teach? (Check all that apply)

☐ English (1)

☐ Math (2)

☐ Science (3)

☐ Social Studies (4)

☐ Other (5)

Q5 Which label best describes the grade level that you taught in your first year?

○ Middle School (1)

○ High School (2)

Q6 Which label best describes the type of school you worked for?

○ Traditional Public School (1)

○ Public Charter School Academy (2)

○ Private School (3)

Q7 Which label best describes the setting of the school you worked for?

○   Rural school (1)

○   Suburban school (2)

○   Urban school (3)

Q8 Which label best describes the enrollment of the school you worked for?

○   500 or fewer students (1)

○   500-1,000 students (2)

○   1,000 or more students (3)

Q9 Did your school receive school-wide Title I support for serving higher rates of students who qualified for Free or Reduced Lunch?

○   Yes (1)

○   No (2)

○   Unsure (3)

End of Block: First Year of Teaching

Start of Block: Curriculum Experiences

Experiences

These next questions focus on your experiences with curriculum and the level of support you received in your first year of professional teaching. Please rate the degree with which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the curriculum materials you received in your first year of teaching.

	1 - No resources at all (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 - comprehensive resources (6)
Assessments (e.g. tests, projects, and exams). (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Instructional resources (e.g. textbooks, digital resources). (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Planning documents (e.g. pacing guides, course organizers). (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Standards documentation (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Adequate resources for all of my students (e.g. classroom sets of textbooks). (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q11 Regarding curriculum materials, I feel like my school district provided me with ...

	1 - Not At All True (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 - Completely True (6)
High quality curriculum materials (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Easy to understand curriculum materials (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Easy to implement curriculum materials (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
All curriculum materials needed to teach my course. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q12 Regarding the support I received from administration and colleagues, I feel like...

	1 - Not True At All (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 - Completely True (6)
I received clear expectations from administration about the learning goals of courses I taught. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
My administrators were competent in my subject area's curriculum and I trusted their advice. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
My district cared about what I was teaching and was invested in my classroom. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
District mentors provided regular guidance on what I was teaching. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○
If I had a question regarding my curriculum, I had colleagues who were ready and willing to support me. (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○
My colleagues and I worked together to make decisions about what to teach. (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I had consistent and ongoing curricular support. (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I was confident about what to teach and what to do next. (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q13 Before I started teaching, my district made sure...

	1 - Not True At All (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 - Completely True (6)
I received quality training on how to use existing curriculum materials before my teaching assignment began. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I was shown what district-level resources were available and how to access them. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I received quality training on how to use any digital resources that were associated with my course. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
My district made sure that I was connected to colleagues who could support me. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I had ample opportunities to connect with other teachers who had previously taught the course(s). (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I was prepared to start the school year because of the training I had received. (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q14 As a new teacher, approximately how many hours per week did you dedicate to creating curriculum materials from scratch to use in your classroom?

▼ Less than one hour (1) ... 10+ hours (5)

Q15 As a new teacher, how often did you spend your own money to purchase curriculum materials to support your classroom?

○   1- Rarely, if ever (1)

○   2 (2)

○   3 (3)

○   4 (4)

○   5 (5)

○   6 - Often (6)

Q16 Generally speaking, how would you rate the overall level of curriculum support you received for your classes from your district in your first year of teaching?

○   1 - Little to no curriculum support (1)

○   2 (2)

○   3 (3)

○   4 (4)

○   5 (5)

○   6 - Lots of curriculum support (6)

Q17 You indicated that you experienced limited curriculum support in your first year of teaching. How did this lack of support you experienced in your first year of teaching impact you and/or your students?

_____

_____

End of Block: Curriculum Experiences

Start of Block: Current Role

Current Role

This final section focuses on your experiences with curriculum and the level of support you receive in your current teaching role. Please rate the degree with which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the curriculum materials and supports you have access to.

Q18 In my current teaching role, I feel like...

	1 - Not True At All (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 - Completely True (6)
I have access to high quality curriculum materials provided by my district. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have all the curriculum materials I need to teach my course. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I have clear expectations about curriculum goals from my administrators. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I regularly collaborate with colleagues on curriculum. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Current Role

Start of Block: Voluntary Identification

Q20 Your responses indicate that your first-year teaching experience is of particular importance to this study's research goals. More specifically, this study is interested in better understanding the types of challenges new teachers experience when they receive little or no curriculum support.

A second part of this study will conduct virtual interviews with participants to learn about their specific challenges without curriculum support. Participants who complete a follow-up interview will receive a $25 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time.

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up virtual interview to help me learn more about your experiences related to missing curriculum materials during your first year of teaching?

○   Yes (1)

○   No (2)

Q21 **Voluntary Identification:**

Thank you for indicating that you would be willing to participate in a virtual interview. Please provide your contact information below so we may schedule a meeting time that is convenient for you.

Q22 Name:

_____

Q23 Email:

_____

Q24 Phone:

_____

End of Block: Voluntary Identification

Start of Block: Incentive

Q25 Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! If you would like to be entered into a random drawing to win one of four $25 Amazon gift cards as a thank you for participation, please enter your email below:

_____

End of Block: Incentive

Appendix B

HSIRB Approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: May 16, 2023

To: LaSonja Roberts, Principal Investigator
    [Co-PI], Co-Principal Investigator

Re: Initial - IRB-2023-148
Teaching without a roadmap: A mixed methods study of new teachers' experience with a missing curriculum

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Teaching without a roadmap: A mixed methods study of new teachers' experience with a missing curriculum" has been reviewed by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) and **approved** under the **Expedited** 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application. **Please note:** This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., *add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.*). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB or the Associate Director Research Compliance for consultation.

Stamped Consent Document(s) location - Study Details/Submissions/Initial/Attachments

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Sincerely,

Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair
WMU IRB

Appendix C

Survey Recruitment Email

Email Subject:

Local Curriculum Study: Give Voice to Teachers in __(Our Local)__ County!

Email Body:

Hello Educator,

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a study about teachers' experiences with curriculum materials. Would you please contribute to this research by completing a brief survey by clicking the link below?

(link)

The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

As a local educator myself, I am interested in learning about the types of experiences teachers are having in our county in order to better understand how we might better support teachers in the classroom. This research is part of my dissertation experience at Western Michigan University, and your input is valued and appreciated.

Also, participants who complete the survey will be entered into a drawing to win one of **four $25 Amazon Gift Cards**!

Thank you for your consideration! All responses will be kept confidential. Please reach out via email with any questions you might have about the survey or my research project.

Chris Williams
christopher.r.williams@wmich.edu
Student Researcher
Ph.D. program for Educational Leadership
Western Michigan University

Appendix D

Reminder Emails

First Reminder Email:

Date: (TBD)
Subject: Local Curriculum Study Reminder

Hello Educator,

I recently invited you to participate in a study about West Michigan teachers' experiences with curriculum. If you have already completed the survey, thank you for your response. If you have not yet responded, would you please contribute to this research by completing a brief survey by clicking the link below?

(link)

The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

As a local educator myself, I am interested in learning about the types of experiences teachers are having in our county in order to better understand how we might better support teachers in the classroom. This research is part of my dissertation experience at Western Michigan University, and your input is valued and appreciated.

As a reminder, participants who complete the survey will be entered into a drawing to win one of **four $25 Amazon Gift Cards**!

Thank you for your consideration! All responses will be kept confidential. Please reach out via email with any questions you might have about the survey or my research project.

Chris Williams
christopher.r.williams@wmich.edu
Student Researcher
Ph.D. program for Educational Leadership
Western Michigan University

<u>Second Reminder Email:</u>

Date: (TBD)
Subject: Please Complete a Local Curriculum Survey

As a secondary educator, I understand the time and energy you invest into your craft. I recently sent you a request to complete a survey about how teachers in West Michigan interact with curriculum resources. If you have not yet completed survey, I would like to offer you one more chance to do so by following the link below:

(link)

This is your last chance to be entered into a drawing to receive one of **four $25 Amazon Gift Cards**!

The survey will take approximately 7 minutes to complete. All responses will be kept confidential.

Chris Williams
christopher.r.williams@wmich.edu
Student Researcher
Ph.D. program for Educational Leadership
Western Michigan University

Appendix E

County Participation Request

Good Afternoon Colleagues,

I wanted to take a moment make you aware of a study I am conducting in our community about teaching and curriculum support. Many of you know that I am a student at Western Michigan University, and I am now engaged in a practicum experience that will help me apply what I have learned about academic research through this study. This study aims to learn about the experiences of new teachers as they enter the field, and I am particularly interested in their experiences with curriculum materials during their first year in a new teaching role.

So far, I have used publicly available information to compile lists of current secondary educators in our county, and I will be sending out an email invitation to participate in a survey from my WMU email account on __(Date)__. I would greatly appreciate your support in identifying potential survey respondents. If you are able to provide lists of emails of current secondary educators within your district, that would greatly accelerate this project. Also, if you would be willing to share this survey link with your teaching team, that would also be appreciated.

Please reach out with any questions you might have. Thank you for your consideration!

Appendix F

Interview Recruitment Email and Informed Consent

Email Subject: Missing Curriculum Study: Follow-up Opportunity

Email Body:

Good afternoon,

Thank you for taking the time to complete my survey about your experiences with curriculum as a new teacher!

In the survey, you indicated that you might be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to help me learn more about teachers' experiences with missing curriculum materials.

What Would I Have to Do?
Participate in one 45-60 minute interview. Interviews will be conducted virtually with a web conferencing tool called WebEx and will be scheduled at a time of your choice. I will ask you approximately 15 questions about your curriculum-related experiences in your first year of teaching and the level of support you did (or did not) receive.

Next Steps:
Please respond to this email with two or three times that would work well for you to be interviewed. I will correspond with you via email to schedule a time, and I will follow-up with a link to follow to start the virtual meeting.

If you have any questions at all about the study, please respond to this email with any questions you might have. I have also attached formal consent documentation for your review.

Participants who complete the interview will be compensated with one $25 Amazon Gift Card in thanks for your time.

Thank you for your consideration!

Chris Williams
christopher.r.williams@wmich.edu
Student Researcher
Ph.D. program for Educational Leadership
Western Michigan University

(Attachment)

Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, & Technology

Principal Investigator: Dr. LaSonja Roberts
Student Investigator: Chris Williams

You are invited to participate in this research project titled *"Teaching without a roadmap: A mixed methods study of new teachers' experience with a missing curriculum"*

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to:

1.   better understand the experiences of new teachers who begin their teaching career without a formal curriculum
2.   learn about what curricular supports might help new teachers in the field

This research also contributes to the fulfillment of the dissertation requirements for student researcher Chris Williams.

If you take part in the research, you will be asked to participate in one interview with the student investigator and. Your time in the study will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Possible risk and costs to you for taking part in the study may be lost time due to participation, discomfort from answering interview questions, and the risk of sensitive information revealed in your responses potentially impacting your career or professional reputation. While there are no direct benefits of taking part in the study, your participation may provide additional understanding about the experiences new teachers face in the field. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
This study aims to learn about the experiences of new teachers who received little to no material supports in their first year of teaching, either because they did not exist, they were not able to be located, or they had no utility without appropriate training. By listening to the stories of teachers who have lived through these experiences, I hope to learn more about the types of curriculum support schools should offer new teachers.

Who can participate in this study?
This study aims to interview teachers who have experienced the most severe cases a missing curriculum in their first year of teaching. The specific criteria for participation include middle and high school teachers whose first year of teaching

- occurred in the state of Michigan
- was primarily in the subject(s) of English, Math, Science, or Social Studies
- responded that they received "little to no curriculum support" in their first year of teaching in the initial survey.

Where will this study take place?
Interviews will take virtually through a virtual conferencing tool called WebEx.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
If you participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one 45-60 minute interview. The interview will take place virtually at a time of your choice. Interview questions will focus on your experiences as a new teacher without curriculum support.

What information is being measured during the study?
This study will examine participants' responses to interview questions. Interviews will be recorded with an audio recording device. The recordings will then be transcribed with a computer. I will be looking at similarities and differences between participants' responses to the interview questions. The final study will describe these similarities as themes and will often use quotes from participants to explain ideas. However, no identifiable information will ever be reproduced or made available to others.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are some risks that you should be aware of should you choose to participate in this study. Because I work and reside in West Michigan, it is possible I may have existing professional relationships with your colleagues. Because this study focuses on challenges you experienced in your career, there is some potential that you could share sensitive information about your past employment. This information could create negative consequences for participants if it were to get back to employers or be made public in our teaching community. Such consequences might include damage to a teacher's professional reputation, damage to existing professional relationships, or loss of future employment opportunities. For these reasons, extreme care will be given to protecting participants' identities and the responses that they share.

The main sources of identifiable information is from the interview responses you choose to provide. To minimize risk, both the audio recordings and the interview transcripts will be stored in private, secure cloud storage provided by WMU. During the data collection process, all identifiable information will be removed from surveys and interview transcripts. While quotes from participants may be shared in the final paper, extreme care will be given to avoid sharing any information that could identify a participant or where they previously worked. No one will have access to the interview recordings besides the student researcher.

Lastly, there is some small risk that participants could experience discomfort from the interview questions. While it is not possible to predict how each participant will respond to different questions, the choice to participate or to respond to any question is wholly your own. You can choose to end participation at any time or to skip particular questions in the interview process.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, your participation may help provide broader understanding about the conditions new teachers often work in, adding to the literature base about new teacher induction and curricular support.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs associated with participating in this study besides the time it takes to complete the interview.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
You will be compensated with a $25 Amazon Gift Card if you complete the interview.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The student researcher will be the only person who has access to identifiable information during the course of the study. Information collected by the study will be published as a dissertation for the completion of a doctoral degree from WMU's Department of Educational Leadership, Research, & Technology

What will happen to my information collected for this research project after the study is over?

After information that could identify you has been removed, de-identified information collected for this research may be used by or distributed to investigators for other research without obtaining additional informed consent from you.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time and for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact Dr. LaSonja Roberts at lasonja.roberts@wmich.edu or Chris Williams at christopher.r.williams@wmich.edu.   You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research and Innovation at 269-387-8298.

This study was approved by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) on May 16, 2023.

Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Introduction Script:

Thank you for participating in this study about new teachers and the absence of curriculum support on many high school campuses. I am a student at Western Michigan University and this interview is part of a study about teachers' experiences teaching *without curriculum*. As a student researcher, I am interviewing you to better understand the experience of new teachers working in a *missing curriculum* environment.

- I will be recording the interview with an audio recording device, and I will also be taking notes throughout the course of the interview

- All recorded information will be transcribed and de-identified after the interview concludes.

- I will be asking you 15 primary questions about your experience with no curriculum. Depending on the responses you provide, I may ask additional follow-up questions to help me better understand your response.

- I expect the interview to take about 45-60 minutes.

- You may ask to skip a question or stop the interview completely at any time.

In the interview today, I am interested in the experiences you had during your first year of teaching without curriculum materials and/or support. Your unique experience is what is most important, so please feel encouraged to share openly and honestly. Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences without curriculum during your first year of teaching.

Interview Questions:

1. Please start by telling me about your experience with starting your teaching career with missing curriculum.

2. Please describe the environment of the school where you experienced a missing curriculum. What was the school like?

3. What communications or expectations did you receive about curriculum? Who did you hear those messages from?

4. As it relates to your missing curriculum experience, what resources or supports *were* you given? What resources or supports were you *not* given?

5. What personal and/or professional challenges did you experience because of the missing curriculum?

6. What were some of the positive aspects of teaching without an established curriculum?

7. Regarding your overall missing curriculum experience, what emotions or feelings would you use to describe this phase of your professional teaching career?

8. What impact did your missing curriculum experience have on you as a new teacher at the start of your first school year?

9. What impact did your missing curriculum experience have on your instructional practices and your professional growth?

10. What impact do you believe your missing curriculum experience had on your students?

11. During that first year, how did you go about lesson planning without an established curriculum? How did you find materials for instruction?

12. When you experienced challenges related to the lack of curriculum resources, where did you turn for support?

13. Based on your experience with no curriculum, what guidance would you give to new teachers who are facing circumstances similar to what you faced?

14. Based on your experience with no curriculum, what guidance would you give to administrators who facilitate the onboarding process for new teachers? (What material supports would be most helpful? What processes would provide the best support?)

15. Is there anything else about your experience of teaching with no curriculum support that you would like to share with me?