## ABSTRACT

JONES, AMY LEVIN. A Case Study of the Curriculum Implementation Process in a Low-Wealth School District: An Examination of the Perspectives of High School English Teachers, High School Principals, and District Leaders. (Under the direction of Dr. Lisa Bass).

The purpose of this study was to explore high school English teacher, high school principal, and district leadership perspectives of the curriculum implementation process at the high school level. This study identified barriers to successful curriculum implementation at the high school level. It explored the perspectives of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leadership involved in the implementation process. This case study took place in a rural school district in eastern North Carolina and included 25 participants. The study had three research questions that were answered through a combination of questionnaire responses, focus groups, and individual interviews.

The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was the theoretical framework for the study. Participant responses were coded using the components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model and themes emerged around those components. The findings from this case study revealed: (1) Using a theoretical framework for curriculum implementation is beneficial to the process; (2) the data revealed that each component of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was necessary to facilitate the curriculum implementation in a manner that increased staff buy-in and promoted the fidelity of the implementation; (3) teacher community is vital to the success of curriculum implementation. This study has implications for teacher leaders, principals, and district leaders organizing curriculum implementation processes. Leaders improve the capacity of the staff to successfully implement change when there is a framework, such as a change model.

# A Case Study of the Curriculum Implementation Process in a Low-Wealth School District: An Examination of the Perspectives of High School English Teachers, High School Principals, and District Leaders

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

Raleigh, North Carolina

2024

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the many people in my life who have supported me and lifted me up not only through this process but over the course of our relationships. For my husband Greg, your love and belief in me is beyond measure. For my beautiful grown-up children, Rachel and Sara, it is the greatest honor of my life to be your mom. For my parents, Dennis and Peggy, thank you for your help throughout this process. You have always given me the confidence to believe that I can accomplish anything. For the students I have served and will continue to serve, this is for you. You deserve the best this world has to offer.

## BIOGRAPHY

Amy Jones has served as an educator for 29 years in Wilson County Public Schools, Pitt Community College, and Lenoir County Public Schools. She received her Bachelor of Music in Music Education and her Master of Science in Counselor Education from East Carolina University. In addition, Amy earned her school administrative add-on certification from East Carolina University. Amy has previously served as a band/music teacher, school counselor, assistant principal, and principal. She is currently enjoying her role as Director of High School and Career and Technical Education with Lenoir County Public Schools. Amy is a member of Delta Kappa Gamma and the Association for Career and Technical Education where she serves as the President-elect for the state organization. She is a proud NC Teaching Fellows graduate, an Alumna of both the Distinguished Leadership in Practice Program through NCPAPA and the BB&T Leadership Institute - Mastering Leadership Dynamics for Educational Leaders. Amy's greatest passion is helping others achieve their goals and reach their fullest potential.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is possible because of the support from my husband, my children, my parents, my in-laws, and the friends who have lifted me up along this journey. I am immeasurably grateful for these special people that have been placed in my path. My husband's love and care sustained me through many a long night of writing and researching. Rachel, my daughter who is an amazing writer, was always willing to read my work and provide edits and suggestions to make my voice stronger. Sara, my daughter who is on her own college journey, let me know continuously that she believed in me and kept me laughing. My parents and my sister Sara were there to support me and to join reading and editing sessions, even on vacation. My sister Deborah was my rock. She talked me through this process and shared her wisdom and experience, which helped keep me grounded. My friends and colleagues have been a support and a sounding board. They cheered me on and encouraged me to continue, even when it was difficult.

The Tuffy Cohort was one of the biggest blessings of this journey. Our group cheered each other on and bolstered each other through the tough times. This group was just a phone call, email, or text away through it all. I am a better person because of this experience. My Chair, Dr. Lisa Bass has been a treasure. She provided wisdom, support, and tough love as needed. I am thankful for her belief in this project and the guidance to bring me to this point. Finally, I want to thank the teachers, principals, and district leaders who allowed me to pursue this work with them. Their dedication to the education of young people is truly special and I am grateful for their giving spirit.

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# CHAPTER 1: FRAMING THE INQUIRY

High student achievement on state and federal measures is a goal of schools and school districts across the nation, yet it can seem an insurmountable task to move the needle in a positive direction. As evidenced over the past few years, educational disruptions have resulted in lower student achievement and an unprecedented teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022; Di Pietro, 2023). In response, schools received federal COVID relief funds aiming to provide resources to overcome the impact of the worldwide pandemic intended to make schools a healthy place to learn and to provide resources to overcome the impact of the world-wide pandemic (Manuel & Mikkelsen, 2023). To combat flagging or stagnant student achievement the U.S. Department of Education noted, one strategy many districts are employing is the purchase of high quality, evidence-based curriculum that is aligned to the standard course of study (2024).

The study explored perspectives of the curriculum implementation process through the lens of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leadership in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district located in southeastern North Carolina. Currently classified as a low-performing district, the district's student achievement has historically been below the average state achievement levels. The unique characteristics of a rural, low-wealth, low-performing district are considered throughout the study.

According to a 2022 study conducted by TNTP, formerly known as The New Teacher Project:

> Students in schools serving more historically marginalized communities—particularly students experiencing poverty—were assigned the most below grade-level work. Students in schools serving the most students in poverty spent about 65% more time on below grade-level texts and question sets than their peers in the most affluent schools.

> About a quarter of students spent most of their time on below grade-level work for the entire school year (TNTP, 2022, p. 1-2).

I selected high schools as the target of my study because my role in the district is the High School and Career and Technical Education Director. In this role, I am responsible for overseeing high school curriculum in all subject areas as well as career and technical education for high school and middle school. I found literature describing kindergarten through high school student achievement but less literature describing high school achievement specifically. In many North Carolina school districts including mine, the pandemic had a negative impact on student achievement results (NCDPI, 2022).

High schools are characterized by enrollment in graduation requirement courses at either standard or advanced levels as well as enrollment in electives (Goldhaber et al., 2013). This makes it more challenging to assess student achievement because there are data gaps as students are not given state assessments in every high school reading and math class as they are in elementary and middle school (NCDPI, 2022). Student achievement in high school appears to consistently slow down in comparison to elementary and middle school gains (Mehta & Fine, 2020). A 2015 Gallop poll of high school students reported that school is neither rigorous nor engaging to the majority of students. When students are classified as low-wealth, the number drops even further.

I selected English curriculum implementation as the focus for this study because student achievement in high school English has been a stagnant area for our district. As students move from elementary to middle and finally to high school, student growth as measured by high stakes testing becomes harder to attain. Increasing English test scores on either state high stakes testing or on national measures such as the ACT remains elusive. By selecting a rigorous, standards-

aligned, research-based curriculum, district and school leadership hoped to see student achievement and growth improve. The English teachers in this district have participated in professional development and have provided feedback to me in multiple settings over the years. I believed they would be likely to participate fully in focus groups or individual interviews.

Teachers in this district had been provided resources, materials, curriculum guides, and pacing guides. Since 2007, they have not been given a full-scale curriculum with aligned resources and guidance. After the pandemic, the district employed a up to ten interventionists and tutors per school to help students who exhibited learning deficits and gaps. Despite the tutoring help, the district identified students for the exceptional children's program at a high rate. Because of a high exceptional children's identification rate and low student achievement, core instruction was seemingly ineffective. Through the implementation of a large-scale curriculum adoption, the district sought to correct core instructional deficiencies. Students have always had the potential to achieve and with access to the best resources and to high quality instruction, they can unlock that potential.

**Background and Context**

Educational equity is at the core of the curriculum implementation. District made curriculum guides and resource libraries are not a substitute for a research-based, vetted, and approved curriculum. Previously, disparities existed in the resources provided to the teachers and students. With a district-wide curriculum implementation, the core components available to students and teachers are standardized from school to school. Evidence-based curriculum programs have been shown to reduce the achievement gap between student subgroups and increase student outcomes (Barton et al., 2017). Data have shown that in communities serving low-wealth students, children have less access to educational boosters such as structured

activities, educational toys, and educational technology due to the lack of disposable income in the household. Schools attempt to make up for the gaps in what can be provided in a household through school-based resources and activities (Ansorger, 2021).

Curriculum implementation of high quality, evidence-based curriculum resources on a district-wide level is important in that it provides equitable resources across all schools regardless of student population or funding levels. The persistent achievement gap continues to widen between minority students, disadvantaged students, and their white peers. In addition to the achievement gap, there is a persistent opportunity gap. When the lens shifts from student outputs such as test scores to input from the school and surrounding community, the input is lacking. In low-wealth communities, students lack access to expert teachers, individualized attention, and high quality curriculum materials (Ansorger, 2021).

Multiple factors must be met in order to implement curriculum successfully (Penuel et al., 2007). Improper curriculum implementation falls into the research to practice gap. When curriculum is implemented with fidelity, positive student outcomes increase (Clayback et al., 2022). Successful curriculum implementation requires a deeper level of communication, relationship, and understanding between all stakeholders. Teachers who report low administrative support or low support in general are less likely to implement curriculum with high levels of fidelity (Clayback et al., 2022).

There is a risk curriculum implementation will fail if there is a realistic expectations disparity between the district and classroom levels. Throughout the process, teachers may feel a disconnect as there is a shift in the perception of teachers as curriculum writers to teachers as curriculum implementers (Craig, 2012). In districts identified as low-wealth, teacher stressors are even greater and can derail or sideline the implementation process (Larson et al., 2018). Thus,

stakeholder perceptions of the implementation process cannot be ignored. Successful implementation takes buy-in from all stakeholder groups, from district and school leadership levels to the classroom level. Strong leaders set direction and goals while sharing roles and responsibilities with teachers and other stakeholders (Segedin, 2018).

Barriers to implementation are abundant (Clayback et al., 2022; Fulmer & Turner, 2014; Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Larson et al., 2018). One of the identified barriers is teachers' perceptions of the process. When teachers have less input on the factors that shape their work, they feel the implementation is being done to them rather than with them (Bryk et al., 2017). Teacher intention has a role in the success of an implementation. When teachers believe that the curriculum is useful, they are more likely to implement it with fidelity (Yu et al., 2021).

Teachers' perceptions of the curriculum are influenced by the amount of professional learning that accompanies the implementation as well as the follow-up support they receive (Zolkoski et al., 2021). However, if the professional learning occurs absent a local or school level context, teachers feel it is of little value (Albright et al., 2013). In this case, teachers are unlikely to fully implement the curriculum as intended but rather, will implement the parts and pieces of the curriculum they find useful (McCoy et al., 2019).

In schools designated as low-wealth, curriculum implementation comes on the heels of additional stresses and demands on teachers' time and effort (Larson et al., 2018). In an age of high stakes testing and intense focus on student accountability measures, students in low-wealth schools consistently lag behind their peers in student achievement measures. Student behaviors in low-wealth schools can be more intense and require higher frequencies of intervention (Day & Hong, 2016). Teacher vacancies and absenteeism are more pronounced in low-wealth schools (Larson et al., 2018).

Overwhelmed teachers are more inclined to resist changes in curriculum (Larson et al., 2018). “Organizations develop a paradigm through which they work – a worldview which is coherent and comfortable” (Wood, 2017 p. 33). When a school must make a shift, such as moving to a different curriculum, teachers and school leadership may resist new ways of working. Viewing the shift to a new curriculum implementation requires a systems approach in which the district considers all of the factors contributing to student success and the teacher experience (Bryk et al., 2017).

**Research Problem Statement**

There is a significant body of research that exists in the areas of curriculum implementation and complex change management (e.g., Bryk et al., 2017; Byrne, 2015; Liou et al., 2022; Lippitt, 2021; Wood, 2017). There is a greater chance of failed curriculum implementation in low-wealth schools (Larson et al., 2018). There is less research contributing to the understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the implementation process in a low-wealth school. This study sought to build an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the implementation process in the context of a low-wealth school district.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore high school English teacher, high school principal, and district leadership perspectives of the curriculum implementation process at the high school level. This study takes place in a rural, low-wealth district that has been identified as low-performing and has historically demonstrated student achievement consistently below the state attainment level. This study seeks to identify the barriers to successful implementation and explores the perspectives of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leadership involved in the implementation process.

## Research Questions

1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?
2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspectives of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

## Statement of Significance

This study sought to examine the potential barriers to successful implementation in the high-pressure environment of a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. Using the perspectives of high school English teachers and principals along with district leadership, this study provides insights into the implementation process and potential strategies for alleviating some of the pressures of the implementation process.

Through this study, I further the body of research using the Lippitt-Knoster change model in the educational setting as a framework for change. The setting for this study is in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing district. Although much research has been documented for urban districts, there is less available research documenting the experiences in rural districts (Boston & Wilhelm, 2015; Bradley & Feldman, 2021; Burdick-Will & Logan, 2017; Clark et al., 2022; Day & Hong, 2016; Finnigan & Daly, 2012). The lack of research focused on rural students is significant as rural students make up 20% of public school students in the United States (Drescher et al., 2022). This study is significant because the district where this study takes place has three distinct markers – rural, low-wealth, and low-performing. The researched and

documented experiences of the staff members in this district contribute to the overall understanding of curriculum implementation in these settings.

**Definitions**

For this research study, the following definitions apply:

- *Curriculum:* A commercial program that includes instructional content, lesson order, pacing, pedagogy, approach to instruction, teacher professional learning, and assessments of a subject of study (Bovill & Woolmer, 2018).
- *Rural:* "A territory that is distant from the regional labor markets of cities with populations of fifty thousand or more" (Clark et al., 2022 p. 5).
- *Low-Wealth School District:* School districts located in counties that do not have the ability to generate revenue to support public schools at the state average level (NCDPI, 2023).
- *Low-Performing School District:* "A low-performing local school administrative unit is a unit in which the majority of the schools in that unit that received a school performance grade and school growth score as provided in G.S. 115C-83.15 have been identified as low-performing schools, as provided in G.S. 115C-105.37." (NCDPI).
- *Research Participants:* High school teachers, high school principals, and district leadership.

**Positionality Statement**

I work in the district that was the research site for this project. I am the High School and Career and Technical Education Director and have been in this role for seven years. In this role, I am responsible for curriculum and instruction that takes place in the high school grade span. Prior to that, I was a principal at the K-8 school in the district, an assistant principal at one of the

traditional high schools, a middle school counselor, and a band teacher. Both of my children attended school in this district, and both graduated from high schools in the district. As a school counselor, I worked with students on both academic and non-academic issues. Through these experiences, I found that some students felt their future prospects were limited by their location or their family circumstances. I strongly believe it is imperative for schools to ensure a high quality education so students have every opportunity to succeed throughout their lives. In my current role, I have worked with several of the research participants for many years. The rapport I have built with the staff in the district was an asset in this project. I found the participants to be open to the transparency of this study and shared their honest perceptions of the curriculum implementation process.

**Theoretical Framework: Lippitt-Knoster Change Model**

The implementation of curriculum is a complex change in an educational organization (Knoster et al., 2000). To implement curriculum in a high school setting, the leadership should consider the educational setting. High schools operate from a departmental lens where teachers are specialized in their subject areas. Implementation of a curriculum area can occur in full isolation from other aspects of the school. As a high school is a complex organization, a complex change model was the appropriate framework for this study.

The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was used to frame the study. This model was presented at a TASH conference by Tim Knoster in 1997 and was adapted from Dr. Mary Lippitt's original change model by adding the Consensus category (Knoster et al., 2000). Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of the model. According to the model, change must encompass all six components (vision, consensus, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan) to have a successful result. If a component is missing or flawed, the change process could

be derailed and is marked by confusion, frustration, and false starts among other undesirable effects (Knoster et al., 2000).

**Figure 1.1** - *Lippitt-Knoster Change Model*


I framed my survey, focus group, and interview questions in these implementation components. The answers give insight into which areas are given more attention or emphasis and which areas are given less attention or emphasis in the curriculum implementation process. The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model is a framework that supports leaders as they implement change in an organization (Kirchner, 2023).

Vision is the foundation for this theoretical model of change. Without vision, there is no moral purpose for the change. In *The Governance Core,* the authors describe moral imperative as the driver for vision, which must be about children's learning and the strategies to ensure that learning occurs (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Once there is a vision for the purpose of implementing a specific curriculum, the other pieces of the change model can be put in place. Vision must be shared with and understood by all parties involved in the implementation so that others can experience ownership of the vision as well. It must be shared and valued by leadership and staff alike (Braskén et al., 2019). Without vision, implementers are confused and fail to see the potential of the implementation (Knoster et al., 2000).

Two-way communication is key to building consensus and that begins during the visioning phase. There is give and take in building consensus and open dialogue where differing points of view are expressed can provide a pathway towards shared beliefs (Knoster et al., 2000). In an educational setting, a natural space for consensus building is teacher professional learning communities. Capitalizing on these communities can lead to a more successful implementation as teachers have the support of their peers throughout the process. The collaboration that exists in a professional learning community fosters problem solving and consensus building (Penuel et al., 2007).

Skill building is a cornerstone of bringing about complex change, and professional learning is foundational to the increase of the skills needed to facilitate such change (Boston & Wilhelm, 2015). In a study conducted by The College Board, teachers were asked how they selected professional learning and their perceptions of the learning (McCoy et al., 2019). The study found that teachers selected professional learning opportunities largely based on cost of the workshop and proximity to their location. Selecting professional learning based on convenience or cost does not address the core issue of building necessary skills and in turn building confidence for the desired outcome. Professional development should be meaningful, aligned with the intent of the initiative, and specifically focused on the desired skills (Knoster et al., 2000). According to the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, if professional learning is missing, there will be increased anxiety on the part of the implementer. Therefore, it is important that professional learning be relevant and intentional so that the anxiety is lessened.

Incentives come in multiple forms such as the ease of program use, resource allocation, skill building, benefits to students, and social aspects. When considering incentives in the implementation process, there are several factors to consider. What incentive is there for the

teacher to use the program? Will the program help the teacher facilitate instruction (Yu et al., 2021)? What are the intended outcomes of the program, and will it benefit the teacher and the students? Lack of incentives or rewards leads to a lack of motivation to implement the program or strategy (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). Intrinsic rewards are strong motivators; lasting change is more likely to occur when people are motivated by their own emotions, values, beliefs, and social bonds with each other (Knoster et al., 2000).

Resources are a key component of the change model. Without the necessary resources, the implementation cannot move forward. Evaluation of the program cannot occur if the resources have not been committed to the implementation (Chen, 2005). Resources can mean physical resources such as books, professional learning, time for implementation efforts, technical resources, and human resources. When time is not factored in, teachers may feel that their workload has increased and their efforts are largely unrecognized by their administration (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). Without the precious resource of time, implementation efforts are likely to stall.

Action plans another part of the implementation process. For implementation to occur at all, there must be an action plan detailing the steps that will be taken by all parties. The action plan provides the blueprint for the implementation effort and key points for measurement. Without an action plan, the implementation will experience false starts (Kirchner, 2023). For example, when implementing a career program for students, a district in Canada experienced success using a five-pronged approach to the action plan: (a) create a need, (b) provide clarity, (c) minimize complexity, (d) emphasize quality, and (e) prioritize shared leadership (Segedin, 2018). This framework provided direction and guidance for the leaders implementing the program as well as the teachers who implemented the program. In this framework, frequent

monitoring ensures the process moves forward. School leaders are the drivers of the action plan and as such, are responsible for consistent and frequent communication of the plan (Knoster et al., 2000). They must strike a healthy balance between planning and action in order for the implementation to move forward.

**Overview of Research Design**

This study is a qualitative exploratory case study focused on the perceptions of high school English teachers and principals along with district leaders during the English curriculum implementation process. Using the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model as the theoretical framework for defining the curriculum implementation process, I sought to understand how participants perceived their experience as defined by the six components of the change model. The participants in the study were high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders who were tasked with implementing a new curriculum during the first semester of the school year. Data collected consisted of questionnaire responses, focus group responses, and individual interviews. Historical documents from the fall implementation were used as supporting documentation.

**Summary**

There are difficulties in raising student achievement considering the recent COVID 19 global pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education reported that purchasing and implementing high quality, evidence-based curriculum that is aligned to the standard course of study is a strategy that some districts have employed to raise student achievement (2024). This strategy along with the background and context of the study were presented to demonstrate the need for this type of research. The theoretical framework is one that is well-known in a business context and has been applied to educational settings. Framing the study using the Lippitt-Knoster

Change Model provided me with insights into the perception of the curriculum implementation process. Using the six components of the change model, this qualitative exploratory case study sought to answer the research questions:

1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?
2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher perspectives of an English-Language Arts curriculum implementation process at the high school level. The setting for the study is a rural, low-wealth district that has demonstrated student achievement consistently below the state attainment level and is currently identified by the state as a low-performing school district. This study sought to explore the perspectives of staff involved in the implementation process, to identify the barriers to successful implementation, and to identify strategies that could reduce the difficulty of curriculum implementation. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?
2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

Through the literature, I provided a foundational background of the problem, describe previous research related to the topic, and provide context for my study.

In this chapter, I examine the topics of curriculum implementation, management of complex change processes in an organization, teacher perceptions of implementations, and barriers to success. This literature review focuses on the characteristics of a low-wealth school district, the unique characteristics of rural school districts, the issues in low-performing districts, the management of complex change processes in an organization, barriers to effective

curriculum implementation, and teacher perceptions of the curriculum implementation process. The discussion of the unique characteristics of rural, low-wealth, low-performing districts will contextualize the issues that may be faced in a curriculum implementation. In addition, I summarize previous research on curriculum implementation and describe the ways in which my study contributes to the knowledge base. The literature review contains information on the chosen research method as well as the theoretical framework for the study. Lastly, I detail the implications for this research study.

**Research Method**

This qualitative exploratory case study focused on the experiences of high school English teachers, principals, and district leaders in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. Case studies lend themselves to social research as the researcher seeks to answer the questions, how and why, while exploring a contemporary issue (Yin et al., 2018). If the intention of research is to gain a better understanding of teachers' experiences and their perceptions, the researchers must be willing to immerse themselves in the teachers' environment. Using the case study methodology in this study allowed for exploration of the perceptions high school English teachers, principals, and district leaders of the curriculum implementation process. This furthered the understanding of how the implementation impacted these groups.

Qualitative research facilitates study in a natural setting designed by the researcher; it allows for a study of documents as well as interviews (Creswell, 2013). In a qualitative study, the researchers typically collect the data themselves rather than collecting data through existing documents or third-party sources. Executing fieldwork provides the researcher with a unique lens into the environment being studied. Typically, most of the data collected for a qualitative study comes through fieldwork (Patton, 2002). Interviews are one example of fieldwork and are

an often-used method of data collection in a qualitative study. Through the interview process, researchers gain insights into the thoughts, opinions, experiences, and beliefs of the subjects.

Interviews can be an integral part of a case study. Through interviews, the researcher can directly focus on the topic of study as part of the larger case study approach. This approach allows the researcher to focus on a complex social phenomenon in a real-world context (Yin et al., 2018). Through this study, I explore a contemporary set of events to gain insight into teacher perceptions of the curriculum implementation process. An exploratory case study approach provides the researcher with insight and context into an organization's process (Yin et al., 2018). In this study, the process is curriculum implementation, the context is a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district, and the insight is the teachers' perception of the process.

## Overview of the Literature

### *Defining Curriculum*

There are multiple ways to define curriculum in the educational arena. For example, the College Board defines curriculum standards for AP courses but does not provide official College Board curriculum materials (McCoy et al., 2019). Like the College Board, individual states have created state standards which some consider curriculum, but the standards are learning goals parsed out into grades or subjects (Marshall, 2024). For the standards to be considered curriculum, the standards map must provide context or a sequence of when those learning goals are to be covered and in what order.

Curriculum provides a set of goals for what students should know and be able to do by the end of the grade or subject. It is also the manner in which a teacher teaches, such as through project-based learning or gradual release methods (Marshall, 2024). For the purpose of this research and literature review, curriculum is defined as a commercial program that includes

instructional content, lesson order, pacing, pedagogy/approach to instruction, teacher professional learning, and assessments of a subject of study (Bovill & Woolmer, 2018). It is a comprehensive package of state-aligned standards, scope and sequence, resources and materials, teaching suggestions, professional learning, and aligned assessments designed to provide students with on-grade level instruction while supporting learning needs.

### *Characteristics of Low-Wealth Schools*

Based on free and reduced lunch statistics, low-wealth schools are found at similar rates of frequency in urban and rural settings (Burdick-Will & Logan, 2017). The teacher to student ratio may be lower in low-wealth rural schools, but the per pupil spending is lower as well. Based on their findings, students in rural areas whose rates of poverty are similar to urban students exhibit low achievement. According to an ACT report on college readiness, students who are not prepared for postsecondary education are less likely to enroll in college and are more likely to require remedial coursework during their first year of college. They are less likely to succeed in college classes and more likely to drop out of college without finishing a degree (White & Levin, 2016).

This problem is not limited to the United States. In a study of low-wealth urban schools in England, researchers found high levels of teacher turnover and less qualified teachers in these schools (Day & Hong, 2016). Students in these schools exhibited mental health and attendance issues, along with lower literacy levels and more incidents of violence. Teachers in these schools are tasked with implementing more interventions but often have increased workload stress (Larson et al., 2018). This leads to compounding issues of lower educational opportunity for students as the social emotional needs overshadow academic focus.

Students in low-wealth schools can become the victims of low expectations even if the teacher is well-intentioned (TNTP, 2022). In the wake of the COVID 19 worldwide pandemic, students are being given below-grade level work with greater frequency in schools serving predominantly low-income students. In these schools, about a quarter of students spent most of the year on below grade level work (TNTP, 2022). “Responsibility for responding to this heightened level of need often rests on teachers, which may compound work overload stress in high needs settings and impact high-quality service delivery at the universal level” (Larson et al., 2018 p. 62).

### *Rural Communities and Educational Settings*

The rural landscape looks different from rural community to rural community. According to the United States Census Bureau, densely settled areas are urban and anything not identified as urban is rural (Manly et al., 2019). Rural and urban areas are designated as mutually exclusive. Using this understanding, rural areas are sparsely populated and, in addition, consist of small towns and communities. While some rural areas might be more isolated from larger cities, many still exist in proximity to and have access to more urban areas. Rural areas demonstrate great diversity in the landscape, the people, and the socioeconomic status of rural citizens.

While most rural Americans are white, pockets of minorities exist in certain regions of the country (Drescher et al., 2022). There are large groups of rural African Americans in the southeast, Hispanics in the southwest, Native Americans in the southwest and northern Great Plains, and Asian students in the rural west. Overall, rural children are less likely to live in a married two-parent home; men have less education than their urban counterparts and are less likely to hold skilled jobs (Clark et al., 2022). In rural communities, single parents are more

likely to live in poverty. While remarriage is more common in rural areas, the blended family creates more transitions. As the official poverty rate is higher for children in rural areas, so is instability and the potential for deep poverty and drug addiction. Food insecurity is higher for students in rural areas as job opportunities for parents are more limited and resources are harder to reach.

Compounding these problems are persistent gaps in access to health care and education (Clark et al., 2022). In rural areas, schools and churches are often the center of the communities. Schools are generally smaller than those in urban areas and are unable to support more specialized classes (Bouck, 2018). Like their urban counterpoints, rural schools receive federal funding but because they are smaller, they receive less per-pupil due to the federal funding formulas (Clark et al., 2022). Bouck (2018) found that teachers in rural schools are more likely to be less experienced, teaching outside of their content area, and are less likely to hold graduate degrees.

Despite these challenges, there are advantages to attending school in a rural area. There is evidence that students are more likely to be engaged in civic organizations and school clubs like student councils and Future Farmers of America (FFA) (Clark et al., 2022). Rural schools are less socio-economically segregated because there are not as many school choices (Bouck, 2018). Students from all walks of life attend classes together and participate in the same extra-curricular activities. Students in rural schools report feeling safe and satisfied with their schools.

The authors of the study “Growing Up Rural” identified gaps in the research of rural communities (Clark et al., 2022). They suggest that more studies are needed to determine the characteristics of specific rural areas and recommend that qualitative studies could fill in the gaps of knowledge regarding social and cultural norms of specific places. They also suggest that

rural communities are under-represented in the larger body of research and more research is needed to fill the gaps.

### *Low-Performing Schools*

According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, low-performing schools are defined as "those that earn an overall school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of 'met expected growth' or 'not met expected growth' as defined by G.S. §115C-83.15". Low-performing schools in North Carolina are identified every year. Once identified they must develop a plan for improvement and notify parents of "low-performing" status. If over 50% of the schools in a school district are identified as low-performing, then the district is classified as a low-performing district. North Carolina General Statute § 115C-105.39 lists specific actions that low-performing districts must take in order to address the lagging student performance and growth.

Under this section of G.S §115C, the superintendent is responsible for submitting a preliminary plan detailing how the superintendent and other central office administrators will work with each low-performing school and monitor their progress. The plan must be made public and available for review prior to approval by the local school board. Parents must be notified in writing of the school's low-performing status, the steps the school plans to take for improvement, and the location of the public presentation of the plan as well as its online location.

A district remains on low-performing status until the following year's scores are released and 50% or less of the schools in the district are identified as low-performing. Since the passage of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, states have become more directive with local school systems and implemented punitive measures for schools that do not meet performance measures.

The groups most likely to be impacted by these measures are schools and districts with predominantly minority populations (Schueler & West, 2021). The punitive measures compounded by other challenging characteristics of low-performing schools such as high teacher-turnover, discipline, and high needs students create an environment that could be seen as less palatable by educators and parents alike.

Viano et al. (2021) studied low-performing schools in Tennessee to determine what school attributes contribute to teacher retention. Typically, low-performing schools are difficult to staff and exhibit high teacher turnover. The researchers surveyed teachers who formerly worked in low-performing schools, teachers who currently work in low-performing schools, and those who left prior to the state takeover. The findings suggested that teachers preferred consistency in enforcement of discipline, administrative support, school safety, small class sizes, and high quality professional learning (Viano et al., 2020). Other findings from the same study suggest that teachers who teach in low-performing schools are interested in tenure and salary structures.

In addition to the struggle to attract and retain highly qualified staff who desire to teach in low-performing schools, other issues exacerbate the problem of student achievement. Safety concerns, security, and student behavior difficulties emerge as consistent themes across low-performing schools. A safe and orderly environment is paramount to teaching and learning. Concerns about safety and student behavior carry enough weight to be included as a section on the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey with questions such as “students at this school follow rules of conduct” and “school administrators support teachers’ efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom” (NCDPI, 2022).

Other persistent issues include substandard teaching and learning, along with organizational and leadership difficulties (Cosner & Jones, 2016). These areas can be addressed through strategies such as goal setting, plan development, tracking action steps, use of leadership teams to support the plan, and consensus building. Instructional leadership is crucial to the school improvement process (Cosner & Jones, 2016). The implementation of curriculum or instructional strategies and the subsequent follow up measures are critical to the success of the school. Acquiring high quality teaching resources and curriculum and implementing them with fidelity are strategies that support the school turnaround process.

### *Barriers to Implementation*

Barriers to implementation are abundant:

> Many organizations develop a 'paradigm' through which they work…However, if for legitimate reasons, this paradigm is called into question, it is often difficult to move people from it, to establish a different worldview. This shift may result in organizational resistance as individuals are forced into new ways of thinking and working (Wood, 2017 pp. 33-34).

Implementing a new curriculum changes the way the organizations run and disrupts the established patterns of teaching and learning that have existed in schools and classrooms. Other factors that hinder implementation efforts includes: (a) lack of clarity and specificity; (b) lack of understanding of the problem the change is trying to fix; (c) multiple, conflicting goals; (d) organizational discord; (e) lack of coordination; (f) poor communication; (g) lack of time; (h) inadequate planning. (Cooper et al., 2004). Curriculum implementation is a daunting task. Implementation efforts are likely to fail to meet intended outcomes when there are numerous impediments to the initiative's success.

The structure of school districts and schools varies within the state and even within districts. There is a variability to the way schools operate and the lack of consistency that exists is a hindrance to curriculum implementation processes (Cooper et al., 2004). Generalized policies and procedures are enacted with varying levels of compliance and interpretation. Curriculum implementation - which is generally a top down or district level initiative - plays out in disparity across school buildings. In implementation efforts, it is important to consider the origin of the change (Cooper et al., 2004). Changes from overseeing entities such as school districts are to be enacted in the local school building. If the desired change, such as curriculum implementation, is at odds with the culture and belief system of the staff in the school building, it is likely to fail (Cooper et al., 2004). When there is a lack of understanding of the vision for the implementation coupled with inadequate skills, teachers resort to familiar and comfortable methods rather than fight through curriculum changes (Porter et al., 2014). Implementing curriculum change is a departure from the school building norms, it is a time-consuming and cumbersome task, and it puts additional burdens on teachers' already full workload.

How teachers perceive such changes has been identified as both a key and a barrier to implementation. When teachers have less input on the factors that play into their work, they feel the implementation is being done to them rather than with them (Bryk et al., 2017). As the actual curriculum implementation occurs at the school level, teachers and school administrators play a pivotal role in its failure or success (Porter et al., 2014). Spillane et al. (2002) discuss the disconnect between the classroom teachers and policymakers' intended purposes. Change requires teachers to rethink existing knowledge and to consider ideas in new ways. Although this is generally considered as positive, at times, considering new ideas as familiar can inhibit the change process. There is a certain danger in thinking that this has already been done or is being

done in a different form. For an experienced teacher, it can be tempting to fall back into old habits or to use familiar resources when it seems that the new implementation is not too dissimilar from the old curriculum and methods (Spillane et al., 2002).

In Byrne's (2015) study of middle level administrators' role in a curriculum implementation, he found implementation problems were an indication of a disconnect between what was actually done and what was intended to be done. Teachers who feel disconnected from the decision-making process lack the buy-in necessary for strong implementation efforts. When teachers and administrators have a clear understanding of the change and why the change is being implemented, they develop a better sense of coherence around the implementation (Wood, 2017). It is necessary to be clear and explicit in the communication of the intention behind the implementation.

Teacher intention factors into the success of an implementation. In curriculum implementation, success lies in the teachers' will and the teachers' skill (Cooper et al., 2004). When teachers believe that the curriculum is useful, they are more likely to implement it with fidelity (Yu et al., 2021). Research suggests that there are three factors influencing teachers' implementation of curriculum: voluntary external training, internal learning experiences, and time commitment (Byrne, 2015). When these factors are not met or are met in a limited fashion, it is likely that the curriculum will not be implemented in the way that it is intended. Teachers may select the parts they like and abandon those they do not like or understand. Another possibility is that the teacher modifies the new curriculum to align with established habits and old curriculum more closely (Wang et al., 2016). Implementation of curriculum in this way defeats the intended purpose, making it seem more like a resource rather than a comprehensive curriculum.

Merely having physical or digital resources is not enough to ensure that curriculum implementation will be successful. Teachers need to acquire the skills necessary to fully implement the curriculum through extensive professional learning (Porter et al., 2014). Professional development is an integral part of curriculum implementation but frequently, there are not enough resources dedicated to providing adequate professional development sessions (Penuel et al., 2007). Reform-oriented professional development is more in-depth in nature and contains mentoring or coaching elements not found in traditional professional development sessions. While considered effective, these types of professional development sessions are time-consuming and require multiple learning cycles (Penuel et al., 2007). Time and funding are barriers to providing this type of intensive professional development and as a result, teachers may not have the background necessary to feel confident in the implementation.

Curriculum implementation is an intimidating task and barriers are abundant. District leadership is charged with finding the appropriate solution to the identified problem, bringing school level staff into the vision for the change, executing a finely-crafted action plan, and then being flexible enough to pivot when plans need to change. Curriculum implementation challenges the culture and belief systems in schools (Bryk et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2002). It threatens autonomy and can be perceived as a criticism of teacher autonomy and skillset. Skilled leaders must lead empathetically but also with the grit and determination to see the implementation efforts through.

### *Managing Complex Change*

Complex change in a business setting has been studied for many years. Although different in nature, complex change is just as challenging in the educational setting. Curriculum implementation interrupts the status quo of the school setting and requires a systems thinking

approach to be successful (Bryk et al., 2017). As a high school is a complex organization, a complex change model is the appropriate framework for this study. Complex change is an often-studied concept resulting in endless change models and recommendations for leaders. This section will highlight several change models including the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, which is the theoretical framework for this study.

Change implies making a difference or becoming different, which results in a loss of or substitution of one thing for another. In an organization, change is often considered from an outside lens. Change leaders ask what they would like as a different outcome or product which would result in a change. Complex change examines how this happens, how change occurs from within the organization, not as a one-time occurrence, but over time (Tsoukas & Chia, 2005). Complex change is a process with multiple steps and considerations.

Managing complex change in schools is a transformational process. Each school is its own entity with a distinct culture, history, norms, and belief systems. While staff may come and go, the core of the school's culture generally remains. This is amplified when attempting to make changes that impact multiple school buildings at the same time. While there is a governing set of policies and procedures for the school district, each school is charged with carrying out those policies in their buildings. Interpretation and execution of such policies can vary widely from place to place making enacting change a challenge (Cooper et al., 2004). In short, it is easy for a school system to function as a system of schools that are loosely connected under the umbrella of the district rather than a cohesive school system.

Leaders approaching complex change need to understand what paradigms need to be left behind and which need to shift. Approaching a complex change by deciding who is for and who is against the change creates a politically driven change that is likely to be unsustainable.

Transformational leaders seek to understand the readiness of the staff for the change and create the action plan to increase readiness rather than to dominate those who resist the efforts (Calabrese, 2003). Transactional leaders exchange actions for rewards. Transactional leaders also bring about change, but it is not sustainable as there is no change in beliefs or culture. A transformational leader identifies with the change and sees the organizational change and the leadership change as one and the same (Burke, 2014, Chapter 16). In short, transformational leaders have greater capacity to facilitate lasting complex change.

Organizational models help leaders make sense of the organization, provide a common language, supply a frame for data collection and interpretation, and guide action for change (Burke, 2014, Chapter 16). In the book *Learning to Improve*, *How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better,* the author suggests a framework for analyzing the institutional context for improvement to guide the work:

1. "Make the work problem-specific and user-centered.
2. Focus on variation in performance
3. See the system that produces the current outcomes
4. We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure.
5. Use disciplined inquiry to drive improvement.
6. Accelerate learning through networked communities."

   (Bryk et al., 2017 pp. 172-173).

This cycle is recommended for implementing small changes, gaining champions for the change through the cycles, and working up to the large-scale change. With the right political conditions in place, change can take place on a larger scale. Since organizations are sites of continuous change, a cyclical approach is an appropriate method for organizing the change

management (Tsoukas & Chia, 2005). Cycles of assessment are reflexive and sensitive to the workflow of the organization.

Another change model conceptualized by Hargreaves organizes a change model into a five-pillar concept:

1. "An inspiring and inclusive vision that brings people together and encourages teamwork.
2. Public engagement which considers society's vision for the future and is not limited to the educational realm.
3. No achievement without investment posits that reasonable and sustainable investments in school systems are necessary to achieving society's goals.
4. Corporate educational responsibility involves corporations into education as a form of social responsibility.
5. Students as partner in change includes students in the change efforts informing educators about the things that help students the most.

   (Alase, 2017 pp. 206-207).

This change model aligns with two of the components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model—vision and consensus—but it fails to address the skills needed to accomplish the change. It also misses the mark on incentives for people implementing the change. Although it speaks to social vision which could be considered an incentive, it is removed from day-to-day practices in the classroom where change is enacted.

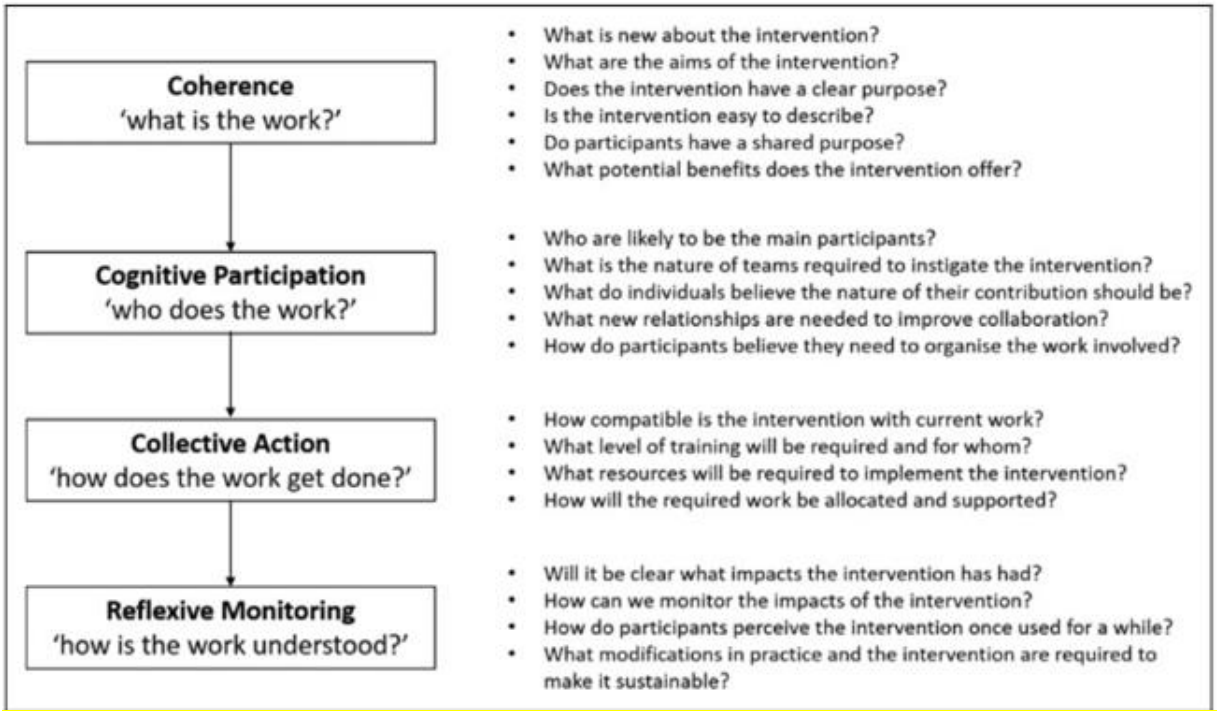
The Normalization Process Theory based on the work of Hooker and Taft provides a planning framework that is helpful in the vision, consensus, and action planning phases of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model:

1. Coherence – What is the work?
2. Cognitive Participation – Who does the work?
3. Collective Action – How does the work get done?
4. Reflexive Monitoring – How is the work understood?

   (Wood, 2017)

Each question has subsets of questions that help guide the work as seen in Figure 2.1. The Normalization Process Theory sets a foundation for the change leaders to frame their thinking as they approach complex change. The answers to the questions within the theory provide guidance to answer questions about the change, why the change is necessary, who to involve in the change, and how to accomplish the change. Leaders can use this guidance to move into the change model of their choice (Wood, 2017).

**Figure 2.1 -** *Normalization Process Theory*



In his research on successful and unsuccessful change initiatives, John Kotter found that change fails when it relies solely on reason and structure. Change leaders must not neglect human, political, and symbolic elements as they move through the change process. Kotter suggests the following eight stages that were found in successful change initiatives: (a) creating a sense of urgency; (b) pulling together a guiding team with the needed skills, credibility, connections, and authority to move things along; (c) creating an uplifting vision and strategy; (d) communicating the vision and strategy through a combination of words, deeds, and symbols; (e) removing obstacles, or empowering people to move ahead; (f) producing visible signs of progress through short-term victories; (g) sticking with the process and refusing to quit when things get tough; (f) nurturing and shaping a new culture to support the emerging innovative ways (Bolman et al., 2006 pp. 461-462).

Although laid out in eight steps, the process is not necessarily linear and can be more cyclical in nature with the return to earlier steps or an overlap in the sequence. Change is a fluid and evolving process as seen in the learning loop for quality improvement where working theories interact constantly with standard work processes and practical measurement (Bryk et al., 2017).

Complex change management models contain similar elements: creating a vision for all that aligns with the desired outcomes, communicating the vision and bringing people on board with the vision, assessing the skill levels needed to be successful at the change, deciding and providing the resources necessary to accomplish the change, and measuring progress towards the goals are commonalities. Along the way, change leaders are asked to be empathetic and flexible yet demanding and steadfast to accomplish the change goals. The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model captures the essence of multiple change models. The elements of the model are vision, consensus, skills, incentives, resources, and action plan. The model claims that if all these

elements are present in a change initiative, then the result will be success. Likewise, if any of the elements are missing, the result could be confusion, sabotage, anxiety, resistance, frustration, and false starts (Bowman, 2018; Knoster et al., 2000). The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model provides a clear framework and context for school leaders to work through complex change processes.

### *Teacher Perceptions*

In the context of a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district, teachers face myriad barriers to the implementation process. The pressures faced by teachers to raise student performance in the face of limited resources and the significant challenges of a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district are daunting. Coupled with the intense student needs, the difficulty of change, and the data driven impetus for curriculum changes, a teacher's workload becomes overwhelming at best. Although curriculum implementation requires significant planning and preparation by the leadership, the teacher is at the forefront of these efforts.

As the primary curriculum deliverer, teachers spend considerable time learning how to navigate the curriculum product and how to deliver the content. Newer or alternatively licensed teachers are grappling with the standards and making meaning of the expected outcomes, as well as implementing curriculum products. Teacher self-efficacy can be a predictor of implementation fidelity; as such, the beliefs and feelings of teachers cannot be ignored in the implementation process (Aytaç, 2022).

Teachers are the primary implementers of most programs in education. The way they feel about programs or curriculum has a role in the degree to which they implement them. According to the Craig (2012) study, teachers are regarded as the subject matter experts in their field and have been responsible for writing their own curriculum based on a set of standards. When a district adopts a full scale curriculum, teachers can feel they have been confined to implementer

roles and feel like they are the executers of someone else's plan. Even when high quality curriculum materials are available, implementation is the key to impact. Teaching quality is still at the heart of student achievement gains (Boston & Wilhelm, 2015).

Many factors influence teacher perception. Professional learning is one of the factors that plays a large role in the implementation process. Teacher perception of the curriculum is influenced by the amount and quality of professional learning that accompanies the implementation as well as the follow-up support they receive. If the professional learning occurs without local or school level context, teachers may feel that it is of little value (Albright et al., 2013). In this case, teachers are unlikely to fully implement the curriculum as intended but instead will implement parts and pieces of the curriculum that they find useful (McCoy et al., 2019). For example, in a study on the implementation of an engineering curriculum, researchers found that professional learning contributed to the teachers' perception of the usefulness of the curriculum.

Attaining an understanding of the curriculum raised the teachers' positive beliefs about the curriculum (Yu et al., 2021). Although professional learning is key to teacher comfort level with curriculum, professional learning can also be perceived in a negative light. Professional learning takes time from a teacher's workday. When professional learning is low quality or not pertinent, teachers may feel their time is wasted or not valued. To combat these feelings, it is preferable for professional learning to be targeted and specific (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). Leaders can alleviate these feelings by homing in on what teachers specifically need from the professional development to be successful in implementing the curriculum. Another hurdle to overcome is the social aspect of a curriculum implementation.

In a high school setting, teachers are often grouped by department and there is little overlap between departments. The social ties in those groups can drive perceptions of initiatives and the work (Sutton & Knuth, 2019). In one qualitative study, the researchers studied the implementation of a project-based learning model in the English and the Social Studies departments and found the Social Studies department embraced the initiative while the English department did not fully implement the initiative (Sutton & Knuth, 2019). They found the more experienced teachers in the department resisted the implementation, and their feelings dominated the department as a whole. The findings suggest the culture of a high school department has a notable influence on the strength of an implementation. A similar study found teachers tend to collaborate with those who hold similar views of the implementation (Byrne, 2015). These findings underscore the teacher community aspect of implementation.

Wang et al. (2016) developed and studied a brief screening tool that identified potential "low-performing" and "high-performing" teachers as implementers of an intervention. Their findings echo that of the McCoy et al. (2020) study in that teachers who do not fully implement curriculum modify the program or drop the components of the program they do not wish to use. The recommendation was to use the screener to identify the "low-performing" teachers and increase their professional learning. This supports other literature that points to professional learning as a key component of increasing teacher buy-in for curriculum implementations.

Another aspect of teacher perception of curriculum implementation is teacher confidence in their ability to deliver the program as intended (Zolkoski et al., 2021). Fostering a positive environment with the teacher as a learner is key to positive perceptions of implementations. Consider the implementation of Common Core State Standards. Teachers struggled to find aligned resources and make the instructional shifts necessary for successful implementation

(Martinie et al., 2016). When teachers disengage from the initiative, it will fail, because teachers are on the front lines of implementation.

## Previous Studies on Curriculum Implementation Processes

### *Integrating Geography Skills into the Middle Grades.*

In 2019, South Carolina adopted new social studies standards overall with a particular focus on geography and geographic thinking (Mewborne & Mitchell, 2021). Prior to the social studies standards adoption, South Carolina released its 2015 Profile of the South Carolina Graduate. Included in the profile's skills were an emphasis on world class knowledge in multiple subjects including the social sciences, critical thinking and problem solving, information, and global perspective. The social studies standards were adopted with these skills as a foundation.

The 2019 South Carolina social studies standards anticipated students use geographic knowledge and thinking to solve personal and community problems. The curriculum expected student outcomes to include using "geographic perspectives, knowledge, and skills to engage in ethical action with regard to self, other people, other species, and Earth's diverse cultures and natural environments. Geography connects students to world events, problems, and decisions throughout their lives." (Mewborne & Mitchell, 2021). The standards were a significant shift from the previous social studies standards.

To support the adoption, the South Carolina Geographic Alliance studied the implementation and districts' responses to the process with the purpose of making recommendations as the implementation continues. The study consisted of six different districts representing multiple regions in the state, rural and urban. Participants were asked to describe successes in implementation, obstacles, the drivers behind the obstacles, and plans for sharing successes and overcoming obstacles. Positive responses included professional learning and

teacher engagement, teaching geography skills with content, and the lack of a single source resource such as a textbook. The lack of a single source resource was also listed as an obstacle as teachers who lack background in this subject felt unprepared to teach it. Another obstacle was the lack of standard assessments. The final obstacle was slowed implementation due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings showed the new standards were engaging, and teachers were generally positive about the standards. A lack of resources and teacher confidence in teaching a curriculum with which they are unfamiliar hindered the implementation. Recommendations for furthering implementation efforts included networking among teachers and a strong instructional framework in the school districts (Mewborne & Mitchell, 2021). This study collected responses from district leaders through an online form. In my study, teachers were surveyed and interviewed directly. Teacher voice is the focal point of my study. The results from the South Carolina study were gleaned from a wide range of districts but only six districts were represented in the study. In contrast, my study focused on one district with a specific regional designation.

***K-12 Teachers' Experience with Open Educational Practices.***

In a qualitative study around open educational resources (OER), researchers investigated teachers' experiences, perceived benefits of implementation, and barriers to OER usage. Researchers used the Technology Acceptance Model which includes perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and attitudes to frame the study. The study, conducted in 2020, was a 16-week study of certified teachers who were graduate students taking an online course. The teachers had varying levels of experience with OER, but most had never used the resources before. They responded to open-ended questions and provided self-reflection notes.

Using deductive-inductive coding, the researcher analyzed the qualitative data to find patterns and subsequent themes in the responses. Seven themes were identified through this process. In addition to comparison and triangulation of the data, the preliminary findings were sent to a sampling of participants who confirmed the findings matched their experiences with OER. In general, teachers found OER easy to use and liked the fact that it is a no-cost resource. Some of the teachers plan to contribute to the resources by submitting their own work for publication in the OER repository.

Barriers included a concern about quality control of an open resource, the lack of support for resources on the platform, time to sort through the resources to find items that worked for their needs, and a lack of professional learning. A limitation of this study is the participants were all in the same graduate course. Multiple sources of data such as surveys and interviews would have enhanced the study (Tang, 2020). Although my study was limited to one school district and the high school grade span, it gleaned multiple sources of data including interviews and surveys which provided detailed and varied data.

***How K-12 Teachers Adapt Problem-Based Learning.***

Teachers are often asked to implement instructional strategies such as project-based learning (PBL). Project-based learning is a proven instructional approach that moves the student to be an active participant in their own learning while the teacher takes on the role of facilitator. While PBL provides an avenue for students to learn at a deeper level, instructional strategy implementation is challenging for the teacher (Tawfik et al., 2021). Barriers include a lack of professional learning and teacher confidence, a reluctance to change classroom practices, and a lack of direction from administration. In this exploratory case study, six teachers who have at

least two years of PBL implementation experience were asked to identify PBL adaptations that respond to the challenges of the K-12 environment.

The participants were interviewed using a structured format. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes. The study relied on multiple researchers' analysis of the transcripts and eventually reached an inter-rater reliability of 90%. The study used evolved grounded theory which allowed the researcher the space to explore the results within the context of previous theories and literature (Creswell, 2014).

Researchers in this study found teachers must adapt PBL to meet the needs of their learning environment. The findings supported the idea that teachers make adaptations to the traditional PBL model throughout the instructional process (Tawfik et al., 2021). The authors suggest that further research limits studies to a single grade span or subject area. My research used the exploratory case study model as well. The structured interview model lends itself to determining how teachers perceive curriculum implementation just as the researchers of this study gained rich knowledge of PBL implementation.

***Teacher Variables Relating to Student Achievement.***

High school math teachers' teaching practices were examined throughout a standards-based curriculum implementation. The study's purpose was to determine which practices are associated with increased student achievement (Schoen et al., 2003). Researchers used lesson observations, student achievement, school demographics, and teacher perception surveys to gather data. The curriculum in this study was a prescriptive set of teaching methods and procedures to be used in conjunction with standards-based instruction. Mathematical standards

and activities were written in alignment with the standards and the scope and sequence was provided for the teachers.

The correlation between teacher practice and concern variables and student achievement were examined. Using student pre-test and post-test scores, researchers were able to gauge the impact of the variables on student outcomes. Variables that made a significant impact on student achievement were completion of an intensive professional development workshop, cooperation with other teachers, and confidence in the ability to implement the curriculum. Additional variables that positively impacted student achievement were the use of more small group work and less use of direct instruction and whole-group work; variety in assessment methods, high expectations for academic factors in grading practices, and utilization of the curriculum as written with minimal replacement or revision.

The diverse sample size spanned 40 teachers across multiple socioeconomic statuses, schools, and classrooms. Findings supported the importance of the teacher's role in the fidelity of implementation and the impact on student achievement (Schoen et al., 2003). This study was limited to teachers who implemented this curriculum and volunteered to be part of the study. My study focused on a district-wide implementation, which included teachers who are required to implement a new curriculum as well as principals and district leaders who were involved in the implementation process. The setting for the study was limited to one rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district.

***The Geography of Rural Educational Opportunity.***

In a 2022 study focused on rural students, researchers provided insights about rural educational opportunities by stating the larger body of research is focused on outcomes of urban students, but rural students make up more than 20% of students in the United States (Drescher et

al., 2022). Using the standardized test scores of public school students in third through eighth grades, the study compared achievement and educational opportunity among multiple educational settings. They analyzed patterns and variations in achievement scores by regions, geographic isolation, and characteristics of the local economy (Drescher et al., 2022). Using the Stanford Education Data Archive, the researchers were able to examine testing scores across the United States and draw conclusions from the data. Socioeconomic status was determined using the National Center for Education Statistics and Common Core of Data.

When examining socioeconomic status, the study found that there is little difference between the performance of rural students of lower socioeconomic status and their wealthier peers. It is suggested that socioeconomic status plays less of a role in a rural area because there are fewer options for students to choose from, and students of all backgrounds attend the same schools and daycares. Despite this finding, the study showed that socioeconomic status was still the biggest predictor of rural student outcomes.

Data from this study showed while rural students overall outperform non-rural students on achievement, rural students exhibit negative learning rates. This could be attributed to a less skilled teaching corps in rural areas, less access to resources that provide differentiated instruction, and a focus on students meeting minimum levels of achievement rather than a focus on students exceeding minimum levels of achievement (Drescher et al., 2022). More study is needed to determine if this is the case.

Other gaps exist in the study such as differences in local practices and policies. Policymakers at the state and national level tend to set policy based on non-rural locales and thus ignore the specific needs of rural schools and districts. Additional work is needed to study the teacher labor market as well as the negative learning rates of rural students. My study sought to

gain insight into perceptions of rural educators, the needs of rural educators. and provides insight into barriers and the specific challenges of the rural educational setting.

**Theoretical Framework: Lippitt-Knoster Change Model**

Mary Lippitt introduced her complex change model in 1984 touting five key areas for effective organizational change: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan. Timothy Knoster updated it in 1997 by adding a sixth change element after vision: consensus (Knoster et al., 2000; TNTP, 2021). According to the model, if any of the elements are missing, the initiative will fail. For example, without vision, there will be confusion. A lack of consensus means there will be sabotage. If skills are missing, anxiety is the result. Missing resources leads to frustration. The lack of an action plan will result in false starts (Knoster et al., 2000; TNTP, 2021).

Vision and goals are set at the top of the organization but getting things done requires working with the individuals and groups in an organization (Bolman et al., 2006). “Successful change requires input from every person, pattern recognition, systems analysis, debate, and innovative thinking” (Lippitt, 2021, p. 60). Building organizational support around the vision is the process of gaining consensus. In the book *Data Wise*, the authors discuss how to establish structures to facilitate school improvement efforts. One of the primary structures is the establishment of a collaborative foundation consisting of a strong system of teams and time for collaborative work (Boudett et al., 2013).

The second component of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model is consensus. In a study of the implementation of multidisciplinary curriculum in a Finnish lower secondary school, the researchers found consensus was an element that was lacking in the implementation. The teachers implemented the multidisciplinary curriculum unit, but the teachers and the headmaster did not possess the same understanding of the process and the outcomes. As a result, the unit was

time consuming to plan and the end goal was not clear. The teachers did not work together to ensure that all concepts were taught but rather taught the unit in isolation and viewed it as something outside of their regular teaching. The missing element was the failure to bring all parties together to ensure a clear understanding of the method, the action plan to execute the unit, and the desired outcomes (Braskén et al., 2019).

Skill is a key component of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. At the beginning of an implementation, it is important to build in professional learning for teachers. As the implementation progresses, professional learning opportunities should become more personalized to the individual teacher. Providing training, guidance, feedback, and the opportunity to problem-solve with colleagues increases the likelihood that teachers will embrace the change (Knoster et al., 2000).

Incentives is the next component in the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. The model suggests that without incentives, there will be resistance to the change. In a separate study of teacher self-efficacy, it was noted teachers believe they are capable of managing a productive teaching and learning environment and that teacher intrinsic motivation is high while their extrinsic motivation is moderate. This suggests teachers perform their job and tasks because they enjoy them, not because of external motivators (Aytaç, 2022). In the specific instance of curriculum implementation, teacher self-efficacy beliefs do predict their motivation to implement curricula with fidelity. Although intrinsic motivation is a greater factor than extrinsic motivation, the results of this study suggest school administrators play a role in increasing teacher self-efficacy beliefs. Providing extrinsic motivators can be a means to boosting self-efficacy and reducing barriers to implementation.

Without an investment in resources, an implementation is likely to fail. Resources include physical resources such as textbooks, time, online resources, and professional learning (Knoster et al., 2000). In a rural, low-wealth district, financial resources can be scarce and aging infrastructure siphons funding from curriculum resources. Redirection of funds from ineffective programming is a strategy that districts can use to support new implementations (Knoster et al., 2000).

Initiating a major change requires an action plan which is the final component of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. An action plan provides guidance and structure for the implementation process. Cohesive action plans contain a balance of details and action steps. In order to implement the action plan, leaders must move beyond planning only at the systems level and consider the individuals involved in the process (Knoster et al., 2000). "Engaging people in the action planning process, and most specifically in articulating the necessary supports needed to be effective, is essential during the initiation phase" (Knoster et al., 2000 p. 110). Including stakeholders in the action planning process encourages ownership in the process.

Although I used the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model for this study, other complex change models were considered. An initiative implemented in Greater Essex County District school board in Ontario, Canada used a different complex change framework with these five components: "(a) create a need; (b) provide clarity; (c) minimize complexity; (d) emphasize quality; and (e) prioritize shared leadership" (Segedin, 2018). The author suggests that by clearly outlining a goal, a vision, and being flexible in the implementation, districts can improve implementation processes. In this implementation, the district chunked the professional learning into shorter, more manageable sessions. By doing this, the teachers were able to more easily gain the skills they needed to implement the program (Segedin, 2018). Although this framework is

clear and concise, the Lippitt-Knoster framework provides both components for change and the potential outcomes when a component is missing.

**Summary and Implications**

There is a large body of literature available regarding curriculum implementation, teacher perceptions of the process, and complex change management in an organization. These themes overlap and have been studied in tandem. The literature shows professional learning has an impact on positive or negative teacher perceptions of curriculum implementations. Other factors impacting teacher perceptions are the professional learning community, or social aspect of curriculum implementation, and the expectations of school and district leadership.

Change models agree on the need for vision, consensus, skill, resources, and action plans which are found in the Lippitt-Knoster theoretical framework. Less literature is available on the role incentives play in the change model, which is also a component of the Lippitt-Knoster theoretical framework. Literature supports the overwhelming need for consensus and collaboration through the change process for the change to be successful. There is a large body of research detailing the need for effective professional learning and follow up with the teachers.

While there are multiple sources describing the attributes of low-wealth schools and the stresses on staff, there is less literature available that correlates implementation processes in low-wealth schools and teacher perceptions of the implementation process. Much of the literature describes implementing social-emotional curriculum, health curriculum, or academic support structures. Less literature is available on implementing a core academic program in a low-wealth context. The research study site is a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. One of the strategies employed by the district to raise student achievement is the implementation of a core curriculum program. The literature supports the notion that teacher perception is key to the

implementation process. Collecting and analyzing the teacher perception of this implementation will add to the body of research for rural, low-wealth, and low-performing schools. In Chapter 3, I detailed the methodology used in this study. The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was used as the theoretical framework and served as the foundation for questions presented to the participants in both survey and interview formats.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I introduce the research design for this exploratory case study. This study explored stakeholder perspectives of the curriculum implementation process at the high school level in a rural, low-performing, low-wealth school district. Through a qualitative lens, this study sought to identify the barriers to successful implementation and to explore the perspectives of staff involved in the implementation process. Curriculum implementation is a recurring event in school systems. Rapidly changing course standards, high stakes testing, and alignment to course standards create a constant need for curriculum updates and thus curriculum implementations. The literature suggests teachers' perceptions and experiences should be considered prior to and during an implementation process. This chapter describes the study's methodology, participants, theoretical framework, and research design. Additionally, this chapter will detail data collection methods, data analysis, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

## Description of Research Methods

Qualitative research is the best method for this study. Researching teacher perceptions of curriculum implementation requires the entry into the study participants' environment, beliefs, actions, and thoughts. Qualitative research facilitates study in a natural setting, is designed by the researcher, and allows for a mixed-methods study of documents and interviews (Creswell, 2013). In a qualitative study, the researcher can deeply study an issue and delve into fine details without the constraints of data having to fit into predetermined categories (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research generally relies on the researchers themselves to collect the data using multiple data sources such as interviews, surveys, observations, and document review (Creswell, 2014). In this study, I used a questionnaire with both Likert scale and open-ended questions, document review, interviews, and focus group sessions to gather data.

Case studies are one of the many ways a researcher can conduct a qualitative study. The case study approach allows the researcher to focus on a complex social phenomena. In a case study, the researcher explores an issue in-depth within a real-world context (Yin et al., 2018). The case study approach lends itself to studies that have a clearly identified case with defined boundaries (Creswell, 2013). An exploratory case study approach provides the researcher with insight and context within an organization's process (Yin et al., 2018). In this instance, the process is curriculum implementation, the context is a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district and the insight is the participants' perceptions. Through the research, my study sought to answer these research questions.

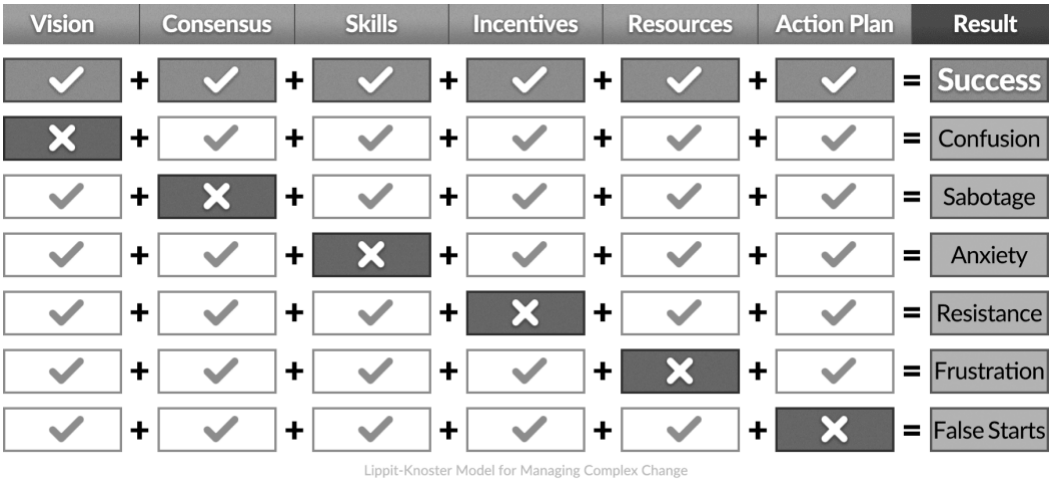
1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?
2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

Through the case study method, I gained insight into participants' perceptions with high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders who had recently engaged in the process of curriculum implementation. Their perceptions provided me with an increased understanding of the barriers to curriculum implementation and shed light on how the process could have been less stressful or difficult.

## Theoretical Framework: Lippitt-Knoster Change Model

To frame this study, I used the managing complex change model attributed to Ambrose, Lippitt, and Knoster. This model is commonly referred to as the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model and provides context for complex change management. According to the model, change must encompass all six components (vision, consensus, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan) to have a successful result. If a component is missing or flawed, the change process could be derailed and are marked by confusion, anxiety, frustration, and false starts. I aligned my questionnaire, focus group, and interview questions to match the six components of the change model as seen in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1** – *Lippitt-Knoster Change Model*




## Perspective Statement

School improvement expert and author Dr. Donyall Dickey (2010) stated "It's not the neighborhood that fosters underachievement, rather it's the instruction in the neighborhood that nurtures underachievement" (p. 122). At the time of this study, the school district was classified by the state as a low-performing district. Although students demonstrate excellence in multiple ways such as earning scholarship offers, winning regional, state, and national competitions, and

completing college coursework while in high school, proficiency and growth on state measures did not meet the benchmark. What the district lacked was core instructional curriculum in reading and math K-12. Although teachers had pacing guides based on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, there was tremendous variability in the resources used to teach those standards. The disparity of instruction became an issue of equity. The differences between schools across the district and between classrooms was evident when test scores were released. Teacher experience, autonomy, and judgement played into the resources selected prior to the curriculum implementation.

To combat this, the district invested a large amount of funding in a reading and math instructional core curriculum for the 2023-24 school year. Curriculum implementation was largely dependent on the teachers who were charged with embracing and teaching the curriculum. When teachers have not had a core curriculum and have had the autonomy to choose their own resources and methods for most of their career, curriculum implementation can be challenging. Implementing a standardized core curriculum required a shift in thinking as well as instruction, and the change became a stressor. My study used the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model to pinpoint the components of change that were critical to the participants' experience in the implementation process.

**Participants and Setting**

This study was conducted in a low-wealth, low-performing school district in rural southeastern North Carolina. In the 2023-24 school year, the district had approximately 8,400 students enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grades. The 2022-23 graduation rate of the district was slightly below the state average of 86% with an average of 84.5% (*High school graduation rate in North Carolina,* n.d.). The district's high schools consist of three traditional

high schools, one early college, and one alternative high school. The district student demographics are outlined in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1** - *School district demographics*

| Demographic | Percentages |
|---|---|
| Male | 50.5% |
| Female | 49.5% |
| Black | 45.9% |
| White | 33.2% |
| Hispanic | 15% |
| Two or more races | 4% |
| Other | 1.9% |

The study participants included 25 high school English teachers from the same district. The English teachers are predominantly white women. Years of experience range from zero to 28. While teachers made up the largest group of stakeholders, the input of the high school principals and district leadership could not be ignored. There were four principals and four district leaders included in the sample.

Most of the students in the district are classified as economically disadvantaged which means a student meets the criteria of directly certified, categorically eligible, or a method consistent with state or federal guidance for financial assistance regardless of participation or eligibility in the National School Lunch Program. For example, students in North Carolina are considered economically disadvantaged if they qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or similar aid programs (NCDPI, 2021). The selected district falls under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which means that the entire school district is deemed

eligible because the percentage of identified students is at least 40% of the total school enrollment.

**Research Method and Data Collection**

Curriculum implementation is a contemporary issue, and the topic is pertinent to today's students which makes the case study method an appropriate research method (Yin, 2018). Case studies allow the researcher to explore questions, issues, or topics in their real-world context and to provide a lens into the experience of those interviewed. According to Simons (2009), "case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a real life" (p. 42).

The qualitative research method for this project was an exploratory case study that focused on the experiences of high school English teachers in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. As all stakeholder perspectives are necessary to examine potential breakdowns in the process, high school principals and district leaders were interviewed as well. The framework for the study was the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. The six components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model were used as a guide for questionnaire and interview protocol development. Questions were developed using the categories from the theoretical framework. The framework gave structure to the process and a context for the participant responses.

Data collection consisted of multiple methods including document review, questionnaire responses, focus groups, and individual interviews for the purpose of finding convergences. Document review consisted of teacher survey results from surveys that were administered during the initial implementation semester. I had access to these results in my role as the high school director. The first semester surveys were helpful because they documented teacher responses requests for feedback on the implementation as it was occurring.

The initial data collection consisted of a questionnaire. From the questionnaire, I sought teachers who were willing to participate in focus groups. The focus groups were conducted using an interview protocol keeping groups focused on the topic to be explored (Patton, 2002). I originally intended to complete follow-up interviews after the focus groups but I found the questionnaire responses and the focus group responses were well aligned. Rather than interview participants who had already been part of a focus group, I interviewed teachers who did not participate in a focus group but were willing to be interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted using the same interview protocol as the focus groups. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. Interviews and focus groups provided access to perspectives and thoughts that cannot be gathered through observation alone (Patton, 2002). All sessions were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed.

The purpose of the questionnaire was two-fold. The first was to collect participant demographic data such as race, gender, years of experience, and teaching background. The second purpose was to ask Likert scale and open-ended questions aligned with the six components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. The responses were reviewed and coded for themes and patterns. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. Questionnaire responses were used to select a purposeful sample for the focus groups and individual interviews to follow.

The questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics, an online tool. Administering the questionnaire through an online platform enabled the participant to complete the questionnaire at a time convenient to them. The online link to the questionnaire was sent through participant email. The questionnaire was open for six weeks, allowing data collection to end in a timely manner.

Focus groups were facilitated using a structured interview process. The focus group questions were similar to the questionnaire, but additional clarifying questions were added in order to expand on questionnaire responses. The focus group setting was conducive to collaboration and consensus which are components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. Focus groups provide insight into collective views and can generate a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Gill et al., 2008). Additionally, the focus group is a way to clarify or extend knowledge obtained from the survey responses. Other benefits of focus groups include collecting a large amount of information in a shorter amount of time and increasing the sample size (Mishra, 2016). I found this to be the case. The focus group setup empowered participants to elaborate on their colleague's comments. I felt I had been brought into their discussion rather than just facilitating a typical question and answer session. Their answers were descriptive, and participants expounded on others' points and statements. Participants also experienced moments where they learned from each other.

Individual interviews were facilitated using a structured interview process. Participants were selected from the questionnaire. The purpose of the individual interviews was to interview those teachers who did not participate in a focus group but were willing to be interviewed. The interview protocol consisted of background questions, a years of experience question, opinion questions, and feeling questions (Patton, 2002). Like the focus groups, the interviews served to provide additional data and clarification from the participants in this qualitative study. To provide further context, principals and district leadership were sampled using focus groups as they comprise a relatively small group. Table 3.2 outlines the data sources that were used for each research question.

***Table 3.2*** *- Research questions and data sources*

| Research Questions | Data Type/Source |
|---|---|
| How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district? | Historical documents<br>Teacher questionnaire<br>Teacher focus groups<br>Teacher interviews<br>Principal focus group<br>District Leadership focus group |
| What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders? | Historical documents<br>Teacher questionnaire<br>Teacher focus groups<br>Teacher interviews<br>Principal focus group<br>District Leadership focus group |
| What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders? | Teacher questionnaire<br>Teacher focus groups<br>Teacher interviews<br>Principal focus group<br>District Leadership focus group |

## Data Analysis

In a qualitative study, data collection and analysis can occur simultaneously. While the researcher is conducting interviews, the researcher can also review survey results, other interview transcripts, and other documentation (Creswell, 2014). Performing data collection and analysis simultaneously allows the researcher to adjust the study as trends emerge. In this study, data were initially organized by sources of information including document review, focus group transcripts, research notes, and interview transcripts. Focus group and interview responses were transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software. Transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and completeness.

The preliminary review of the transcripts provided a general overview of ideas about theme, tone, and reflection. Deductive coding is an appropriate method when the case study is driven by a specific theoretical framework and patterns are likely to emerge around the tenets of the framework (Saldaña, 2021). Deductive coding was used to search for themes centered around

the six components of the Lippitt-Knoster framework (Knoster et al., 2000) and the outcomes described in the framework as shown in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3** - *Deductive codes*

| **Theoretical Components - Implementation** | **Theoretical Framework - Outcomes** |
|---|---|
| | Success |
| Vision | Confusion |
| Consensus | Sabotage |
| Skills | Anxiety |
| Incentives | Resistance |
| Resources | Frustration |
| Action Plan | False Starts |

In this research, the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model provided a structure for finding patterns and frequency of responses. Using the components of the framwork to analyze participant responses showed how much emphasis was given to each one. I was able to understand what the participants valued and where gaps in the model occurred.

Additionally, I took an In Vivo approach as I looked for patterns in the participants' responses. As patterns emerged, they became their own codes, separate from the deductive codes. Once interview and survey responses began to overlap, inductive codes emerged leading to a combination approach of inductive and deductive coding (Saldaña, 2021). This study was to gain perception data and as such, it was important to honor the voice of the participants (Miles et al., 2014). In Vivo coding helped me understand what was significant to the participants throughout the curriculum implementation process (Saldaña, 2021). As the data were collected, I made preliminary notes and journaled throughout the process. These initial notes and observations of the data collection assisted in assigning context to the data sources. Saldaña

(2021) suggested formatting data into three columns: Raw Data, Preliminary Codes, and Final Codes.

I reviewed transcripts and participant responses multiple times until the themes and codes provided an overall picture of how they fit into the theoretical framework. I used NVivo coding software to analyze the focus group and transcription data. Questionnaire data was analyzed using the analysis tools in Qualtrics. During the final stages of data review, Creswell (2014) suggests asking "What were the lessons learned?" Answering this question assisted in capturing the overall results of the research and in finding answers to research question 3. Using the lessons learned and the emergent themes, I was able to create a rich textual description of the findings. To provide visual representations of the data, I provided samples of the initial coding process and data are displayed in Appendix D.

To ensure the validity of the research, I used multiple collection methods such as historical documents, a questionnaire, focus groups, and interviews. Using multiple sources of data provides the opportunity for a convergence of evidence from a single study. The use of multiple sources serves to increase confidence that the findings from the case are accurately reported (Yin, 2018). The data were compared to look for themes and codes that were represented across multiple data sources. Additionally, participants had access to the major findings and themes and the opportunity for a follow-up interview to clear up any misconceptions or misunderstanding of the initial responses. Finally, I used peer debriefing to assist with ensuring accuracy and interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

**Ethical Issues**

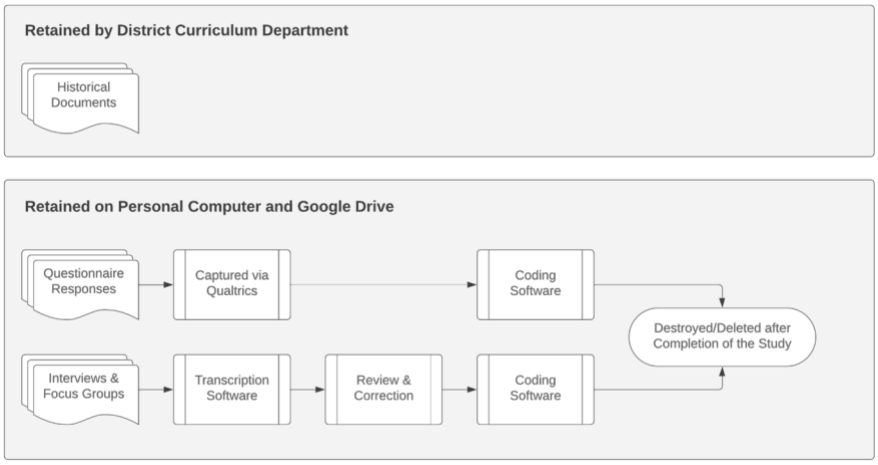
I chose to conduct this study in the district where I work. I have been in my current role for seven years and have known many of the teachers for that amount of time. Participation in

the study was voluntary. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. I provided the participants with information about the study, the risks and benefits of taking part in the study, and their option to withdraw from the study at any time. Although I knew the participants, their identity was kept confidential, and the data are not shared in a way that reveals the participants. I used pseudonyms for all names of the participants, and I shared the study results with the participants.

The questionnaire contained questions that collected demographic data and participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group and/or individual interview. During both, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and how the information will benefit future curriculum implementation processes. They were informed they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants in the focus groups and individual interviews signed a consent form to participate in the study. The participant form is found in Appendix C.

I informed the participants they would have the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy before the results were published. After the study was complete, I shared the results with the participants. Researcher bias is a possibility in qualitative studies (Patton, 2002). I controlled for bias by utilizing member checks, peer review of data, and peer debriefing. The data are being stored in a secure setting to ensure the anonymity of all participants in the study. The data lifecycle is shown in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2** – *Data lifecycle*




## Researcher Experience

Through this study, I had the unique opportunity to gather regular feedback from all people involved in the work of the district. I have worked with teachers and principals in meetings and informally individually but had not engaged in specific inquiry and dialogue using a structured protocol. I found this to be a powerful process for me and for the participants. Because of the nature of case studies, participant voice is honored and welcomed. In this space, principals and teachers took the opportunity to share their experiences with me and their feedback will be used to improve future initiatives.

## Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this study was the amount of time it took to complete the data collection. The curriculum was implemented in the fall 2023 semester and data collection began in the spring 2024 semester. Teachers had implemented the curriculum for one semester when I began the data collection process. In this school district, high schools run on a block schedule. This means the teachers teach the entire course in one semester. They experienced one full semester of implementation before I began data collection and had the opportunity to adjust and learn

before the second semester implementation. With the time left in the school year, the data collection was a quick turn-around.

Another limitation is my dependence on the participants to be honest and open. My role as the High School/Career and Technical Education Director is non-evaluative. I am also considered a peer of the principals, and I do not supervise them. I have served in this district for over twenty years, and I have known many of the participants for almost that long. I believe the development of relational trust that I have built over many years freed the participants to be honest and open. This is evidenced in their responses to the questions as they provided both positive and negative feedback. It was important to me to gather all aspects of the input both positive and negative. By listening to it all and gaining insights into their perspectives, I can refine and improve my practice as a leader.

**Delimitations of the Study**

In the 2023-24 school year, the district implemented English curriculum K-12 and math curriculum K-12. I limited the study to one school district. Since it was my own district, I was aware of the timeline and the historical information that would aid in my understanding of the research questions. I had access to historical documents, the approval of the superintendent to conduct the study and, I was immersed in the work.

I only studied the high school English implementation although the district implemented English and math curriculum across the K-12 grade span. Studying all three grade spans would have made the study too broad and unmanageable for one researcher. I did want the context of the other grade span directors and found that we experienced the implementations in similar ways. We also provided each other support and sharing of resources throughout the process of implementation. Case studies are built around immersion with the participants. The interview

and focus group process would have been challenging to complete with both curriculum areas. Additionally, the curriculum selected for English and math did not come from the same vendor which meant the professional development and resources were very different from each other.

**Summary**

This study was a qualitative exploratory case study conducted in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. The study explored the perceptions and experiences of high school teachers, high school principals, and district leaders who implemented a new English curriculum. The qualitative method was selected because it allows the researcher to engage with study participants at a deeper level than quantitative data could provide. The emphasis on understanding the curriculum implementation process and how teachers perceive barriers gave insight into ways to address the difficulty of implementing change. To ensure a robust sample, I collected multiple sources of data including document review, surveys, focus groups, and interview responses. In Chapter 4, I discuss how the research was conducted and then present the findings from the data analysis. To support the findings, I share the codes that emerged from the data sources as well as participant quotes and information from my field notes.

# CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The focus of this study is to explore the perceptions of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders of an English Language Arts curriculum implementation process at the high school level in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. This study seeks to identify the barriers to successful implementation and to explore the perspectives of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leadership involved in the implementation process. I gathered information through the following research questions:

1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?
2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

Curriculum implementations are recurring events in school districts. Academic standards revisions and increased focus on student achievement are often the impetus for such implementation processes (Ansorger, 2021; Cooper et al., 2004). Regardless of the school setting, curriculum implementation is a stressful event, and the changes brought about through curriculum implementation can be unsettling to both experienced and inexperienced staff. In a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district, the stress of curriculum implementation in addition to the other challenges of such a setting is often enough to derail the implementation process (Larson et al., 2018; Zolkoski et al., 2020).

In this chapter, I describe the data collection process and the themes that emerged from the questionnaire, the interviews, and the focus groups. This chapter describes the setting for the study as well as provides an overview of the participants and the context of the study. I share the responses from the participants who have experienced English Language Arts curriculum implementation and highlight commonalities and themes that deepened my understanding of perceptions from multiple points of view. The theoretical framework for this study is the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. After I share the overall coding and themes, I explain the emergent themes and how they correspond to the components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. In addition, I share themes that emerged that are not necessarily aligned to the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model but are significant in that they share commonalities across all types of respondents. Finally, I provide an overview of the study as it concluded with the closure of the school year.

**Context of the Study**

This exploratory case study took place in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district in eastern North Carolina, Riverbank Public Schools. The district serves approximately 8,400 students with around 2,600 high school students enrolled. Riverbank is considered a Title I school district with all but the Early College qualifying for federal funds. The district has a diverse student population consisting of 45.9% Black, 33.2% White, 15% Hispanic, and 4% Two or more races.

Riverbank had not adopted a wholesale curriculum since 2007. English teachers had been using the old textbooks as a resource for short stories, poems, and other passages. The old textbooks were not aligned to Common Core standards nor to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Riverbank had created pacing guides and hired teachers each summer to revise

the guides and add teacher curated resources. Resources were housed in the district shared drive for teachers to access. Common assessments included district created benchmark assessments to be given two times per semester using the state bank of questions. When the state provided twice per semester check-in assessments, the district moved to using these instead. The assessments were used as data points to assess student progress and alignment to the standards.

Despite common pacing guides and a bank of resources, disparities in instruction existed across the district's English classrooms. Teachers had autonomy to select their resources and the work they assigned students. Student achievement results across the district varied widely on both state assessments such as the English II End of Course test and national assessments such as the ACT. With historically stagnant test scores, the district decided to commit to a district-wide English Language Arts curriculum in all grade levels. In the spring of 2023, principals, district leaders, and lead teachers were tasked with exploring curriculum resources. They were invited to attend vendor sales pitches, curriculum review sessions, and to take the resources back to their schools to share with the teachers. The selection teams were provided with a rubric for rating the curriculum and were asked to provide extensive feedback on the products. At the end of the process, the high school selection team chose a curriculum that was rigorous and aligned with common core standards. The curriculum provided a North Carolina prioritized pacing, resources for differentiation, an online platform, and a Learning Management System integration. The team elected to include professional development as part of the implementation package.

The curriculum was purchased during summer 2023 and implemented in the fall 2023 semester. During the summer, district leadership created a preliminary pacing guide using the vendor-provided North Carolina prioritized pacing. During the beginning of year workdays, teachers attended two days of professional development led by the company's trainers with

Riverbank district leadership in attendance to provide support. With the short turn-around time from purchase to the beginning of the school year, not all the materials arrived prior to the return of the teachers but the materials were received in time for the students' first day. Teachers were instructed to begin using the curriculum full time in week three of the fall semester. The intent was to provide teachers time to set their classroom expectations, use familiar beginning-of-year materials, and have the chance to explore the curriculum before they began teaching with it.

Throughout the fall semester, district leadership sent weekly surveys to the teachers to check on pacing and to get a general sense of how the teachers were feeling about the implementation. The surveys asked teachers if they had taught the lessons specified in the pacing guide and provided space for open responses and reflections. Not all teachers answered the surveys, but many answered every week. District leadership used the survey responses to adjust pacing and to respond to issues that were mentioned. District leadership sent the teachers a newsletter once or twice each month that contained the pacing for a three-week span. The pacing was adjusted in response to the weekly surveys throughout the semester.

From the beginning of the school year, English teachers met in district-wide professional learning communities (PLC) on four of the early student release days during the school year. They attended one follow-up professional development session led by the company's trainers on a required workday in January. During the PLC meetings, teachers discussed pacing, specific lessons, and the results of NC Check-in assessments. Teachers also met in PLC meetings at their individual schools. Using the first semester End of Course testing results, teachers developed a "focused finish" strategy. They created short common formative assessments using the North Carolina bank of questions. These assessments were used at the end of semester for assessment, review, and reteaching.

After the June workdays, all high school English teachers were invited to attend a week-long workshop to discuss the assessment data, goals for the 2024-25 school year, and adjust the pacing guides based on their year one implementation and the student assessment results. Not all the teachers were able to attend the workshop but a core group representing all four course levels did attend to do the work. During the workshop, teachers and district leadership revised and created common formative assessments to be given throughout the semester using the North Carolina bank of questions. During the 2024 beginning-of-year workdays, the teachers met in their district-wide PLC to discuss the revised curriculum guides and to plan for the first few weeks of the school year.

The theoretical framework for this study is the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, as it provides context for complex change management. According to the model, change must encompass all six components (vision, consensus, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan) to have a successful result (Knoster et al., 2000). If a component is missing or flawed, the change process could be derailed and are marked by confusion, anxiety, frustration, and false starts. I aligned my questionnaire, focus group, and interview questions to match the six components of the change model.

**Data Collection**

Throughout the study, I collected several forms of data. I used district-administered surveys as historical documentation of teacher perceptions as they were fully engaged in the first few months of curriculum implementation. The district weekly surveys asked teachers if they had completed the lessons outlined on the pacing guide for that week and asked for any reflections they might have from the week. The open responses on these surveys provided a real-time look into the implementation process as it was happening. I reviewed the open-ended

responses and compared those to questionnaire responses. The historical documents gave me a first look into how the teachers were feeling about the implementation from the earliest days to the end of the first semester. They provided a basis for comparison when I administered the questionnaire in the second semester.

After the second semester began, I administered a mixed questionnaire to high school English teachers through Qualtrics. The questionnaire contained demographic data questions, seven Likert scale questions, and three open-ended questions. The questions were aligned with the six components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. The link for the survey was sent to teachers through their email on March 15, 2024. The survey was open for six weeks. Twenty-three participants were invited and 16 responded for a response rate of 70%. Of the 16 respondents, 13 completed the entire survey for an overall response rate of 57%. Three teachers completed the demographic information and then elected to drop out of the survey when they reached the Likert scale questions. The last question asked was if the teachers would be willing to participate in a focus group or individual interview as a follow-up to the survey. I used the results of the survey to invite teachers to the focus groups and individual interviews. Teacher years of experience is shown in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1** - *Number of questionnaire respondents by years of experience*

| Years of teaching experience | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 0 - 3 | 5 | 36% |
| 4 - 10 | 4 | 29% |
| 11 - 20 | 2 | 14% |
| 21 - 25 | 1 | 7% |
| 25 or more years | 2 | 14% |
| Total | 14 | 100% |

In the next phase of data collection, I interviewed six teachers for a total of five interviews. Some of the teachers who were interviewed had not completed the survey. Those teachers reached out to me and asked if they could be interviewed. Due to scheduling constraints, I conducted one interview with two teachers together. I conducted three teacher focus groups with a total of 25 teacher participants. I used open-ended questions that aligned with the six components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. The questions were framed to gather more detail than the questionnaire Likert scale questions provided.

Originally, I intended to interview teachers individually based on focus group responses. During the focus groups, I found that the responses were well aligned to the questionnaire responses. Interviewing a participant who had completed the questionnaire and participated in a focus group would have saturated the data with their responses. I pivoted and instead interviewed individual teachers who were unable to join the scheduled focus group meetings or who teach at our smaller specialized high schools as a singleton or on a team of two. This phase of data collection is detailed in the Table 4.2 below:

**Table 4.2** - *Number of participants by setting*

| Setting | # of Participants | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher Focus Groups | 19 | 76% |
| Teacher Interviews | 6 | 24% |
| Total | 25 | 100% |

I conducted five focus groups in total. Three of the focus groups were teacher focus groups which were held at their specific high school in a teacher's classroom. I included more teachers in the focus groups and interviews than responded to the survey. Teachers recruited each other from their own departments to participate in the focus groups and all signed the consent form. District leaders took part in another focus group held at the Central Services

building. This group consisted of the grade span curriculum directors, the Academically Intellectually Gifted and Digital Learning Director, and the Associate Superintendent. The final focus group consisted of four of the five high school principals. This group was also conducted at the Central Services building. Each session was recorded with participant permission and the transcripts were produced using Otter.ai software. A sample of the consent form can be found in Appendix C. The breakdown of participants is detailed in Table 4.3 below:

**Table 4.3** - *Focus group settings*

| Group | Site | # of Participants | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teachers | West High School | 4 | 21% |
| Teachers | East High School | 3 | 16% |
| Teachers | Central High School | 4 | 21% |
| District Leaders | Central Services | 4 | 21% |
| Principals | Central Services | 4 | 21% |
| Total | | 19 | 100% |

**Research Participants**

Research participants included high school English teachers, high school principals, and district curriculum team leadership. The English teachers who participated represented a wide range of experience from less than one year to over 40 years. Every high school in the district was represented in the study. Every high school principal except one participated in the study. The high schools represented all three traditional high school settings, the Alternative School, and the Early College setting. The experience range of the principals ranged from 18 years to over 30 years in education. The district leadership group consisted of the Associate Superintendent, the Academically Intellectually Gifted and Digital Learning Director, the Middle

Grades Director, and the Elementary Director. The experience range of the district leadership group was 21 to 28 years in education.

I am the High School and Career and Technical Education Director and part of this curriculum team. I am the researcher for this study. My role in the district is to provide curriculum support to all high school teachers in the district and to administer the Career and Technical Education program. No Career and Technical Education teachers or staff participated in the study, and I do not supervise any of the participants in the research group. My background is in K-12 music education, K-12 guidance, and K-12 school administration. I also earned my Career and Technical Education Director certification through coursework and professional development. This study presented a unique opportunity to more closely examine curriculum implementation and will help inform future curriculum implementation projects. Participant demographics can be found in Table 4.4 below.

**Table 4.4** - *Participant demographics*

| Participant Pseudonym | Years of experience | Role | Characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brenda | 21-25 | District Leader | Energetic, experienced educator with a wealth of instructional leadership knowledge, feels that the implementation has been successful |
| Daniel | 0-3 | Teacher | Young teacher who seems willing to experiment with the curriculum, likes structure and order |
| Derrick | 21-25 | Teacher | Teacher who is concerned with classroom management, feels comfortable with his implementation of the curriculum |
| Eliza | 4-10 | Teacher | Teacher who was slow to embrace the curriculum but sees the value in it |
| Eva | 11-20 | Teacher | Teacher who was apprehensive about using the curriculum and was concerned about the loss of autonomy |
| Faith | 21-25 | District Leader | Experienced educator who is cautiously optimistic about the use of the new curriculum, is concerned about the implementation in year two |
| Freddy | 4-10 | Teacher | Young teacher who was committed to using the curriculum as an experiment |

**Table 4.4** (continued)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Georgia | 21-25 | Teacher | Experienced teacher who was uncomfortable with the curriculum and wanted more information |
| Grace | 21-25 | District Leader | Experienced educator who has a positive outlook, sees the growth in teacher capacity from the use of the curriculum, and wants to do more to support the use of the curriculum |
| Holly | 11-20 | Teacher | Teacher who is a self-described "rule follower" who wanted to make sure she was implementing the curriculum correctly and was concerned with the expense of the curriculum |
| Jack | 25+ | Principal | Experienced school leader who saw the value of a common resource for all teachers that would bring equity across the district |
| Jasmine | 11-20 | Principal | Experienced school leader who saw the value of a common resource and spent much of the implementation addressing teacher concerns |
| Leah | 11-20 | Principal | Experienced school leader who saw the value of the curriculum and saw her teachers become more confident throughout the process |
| Liam | 4-10 | Teacher | Confident teacher who cautiously used the curriculum but was worried about the loss of autonomy |
| Lisa | 0-3 | Teacher | Young teacher who was appreciative of the resource because it streamlined her planning but was worried about the curriculum's alignment to the state standards |
| Lucas | 0-3 | Teacher | New teacher who was appreciative of the resource because it streamlines planning but was concerned about the lack of flexibility |
| Margaret | 25+ | Teacher | Experienced teacher who was uncomfortable with the implementation and was worried about the loss of autonomy, alignment to the standards, and how new teachers would navigate the balance of instruction |
| Nora | 25+ | Teacher | Experienced teacher who implemented some of the curriculum but relied on tried-and-true methods for state testing preparation |
| Olivia | 25+ | Teacher | Experienced teacher who felt the weight of helping her school department implement the curriculum, she acknowledged that it was difficult to change when teachers have had complete autonomy over their resources in the past |

**Table 4.4** (continued)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Patti | 25+ | Principal | Experienced school leader who believed the curriculum will make a difference in rigor and instruction; she enjoyed participating in her teachers' meetings when they discussed the curriculum |
| Rosalyn | 0-3 | Teacher | New teacher who appreciated having a resource to help her plan for lessons |
| Sophia | 21-25 | District Leader | Experienced leader who believed that a common resource would bring equity to classrooms across the district |
| Stella | 4-10 | Teacher | Teacher who enjoyed getting to know other teachers through the curriculum implementation process |
| Todd | 4-10 | Teacher | Teacher who was very uncomfortable with implementing the curriculum but enjoyed working with teachers from across the district through the process |
| Tracy | 11-20 | Teacher | Teacher who found value in the professional development and in having a common resource |

## Data Analysis

### *Codes and Codebook*

I began the coding process using an In Vivo approach to the process. I knew I would eventually use a deductive coding scheme based on the six components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model and the six results. I used Nvivo software to code and to catalog the historical documents, transcripts, and survey results. The questionnaire as well as the interview and focus group questions were aligned to the components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. Using Nvivo software, I ran a word frequency query to explore what words showed up most frequently in the transcripts. Words that appeared included but are not limited to: curriculum, teachers, new, helpful, timing, implementation, resources, writing, support, differently, questions, process, plans, feel, and experience. After looking at word frequency, I moved to the deductive coding scheme to determine if the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model components emerged through the data. On the initial analysis, the deductive codes emerged across the survey, the interviews, and

the focus groups. It became clear the curriculum implementation process fits into the tenets of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. Certain components carried more weight than others depending on the cases responding to the questions. Subsequent passes revealed more data which supported the deductive coding scheme.

Deductive coding is an appropriate method when the case study is driven by a specific theoretical framework and patterns are likely to emerge around the tenets of the framework (Saldaña, 2021). Deductive coding was used to search for themes centered around the six components of the theoretical framework and the outcomes described in the framework as shown in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5** - *Deductive codes*

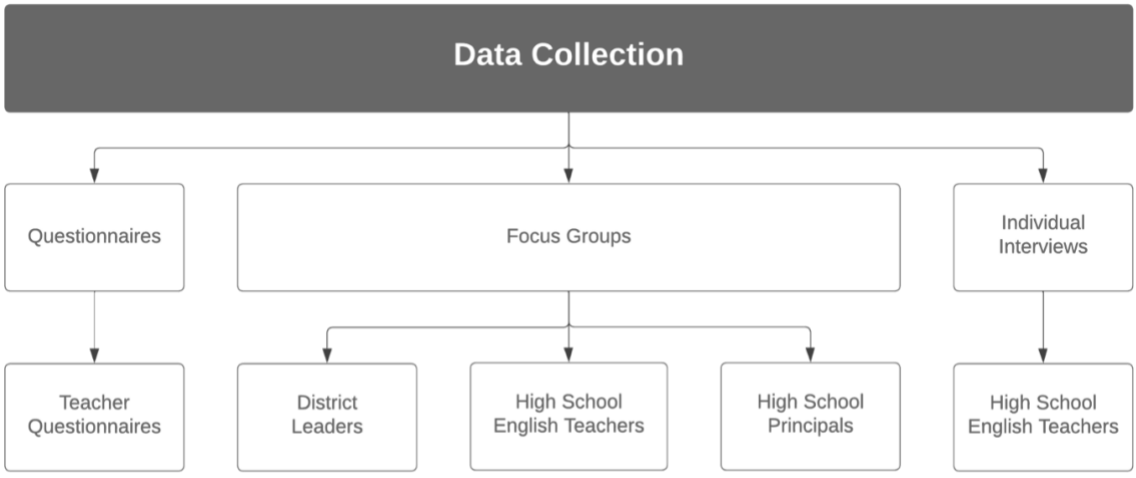
| **Theoretical Components - Implementation** | **Theoretical Framework - Outcomes** |
|---|---|
| | Success |
| Vision | Confusion |
| Consensus | Sabotage |
| Skills | Anxiety |
| Incentives | Resistance |
| Resources | Frustration |
| Action Plan | False Starts |

On the next pass of coding, I took an In Vivo approach as I went back to the transcripts and looked for themes in the participants' responses. As patterns emerged, they became their own codes separate from the deductive codes. Once interview and survey responses began to overlap, inductive codes emerged leading to a combination approach of inductive and deductive coding (Saldaña, 2021). This study was to gain perception data and as such, it was important to honor the voice of the participants (Miles et al., 2014). In Vivo coding helped me understand what was significant to the participants throughout the curriculum implementation process

(Saldaña, 2021). As the data were collected, I made preliminary notes and journaled throughout the process. These initial notes and observations of the data collection assisted in assigning context to the data sources.

The questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups were administered and conducted during the second semester of the school year. See Figure 4.1 for second semester data collection. In my professional role, I had access to the pacing surveys the district administered during the first semester. The pacing surveys asked the teachers to indicate if they had completed specified lessons during the week in which they were to be assigned. The survey provided open response questions for the teachers to provide feedback and information to the district as well as ask questions that required district responses. These historical documents provided real-time insight into how the teachers were feeling about the implementation and how they were progressing with the curriculum (Creswell, 2014). These responses aligned with the latter data collection cycle. Deductive and inductive coding of historical documents revealed similar patterns of teacher responses to the second semester data collection.

**Figure 4.1** - *Data collection*



Using matrix queries in NVivo gave me insight into how the inductive codes fit into the deductive codes. These matrix queries assisted me with relating the myriad responses and finding the patterns within. The codes were sorted into three categories; components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, results of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, and emergent themes. In Vivo coding showed themes that were represented in the transcripts. Table 4.6 found below provides an example of the In Vivo coding pass.

**Table 4.6** - *Codebook Example – In Vivo coding pass*

| Raw Data | Preliminary Codes | Final Code |
|---|---|---|
| I feel like it is because for the first time ever, kids, not ever, ever, but for the first time in a long time. We know our children are being exposed to grade level content period. Every day. And that is that has just not been the case. Always and in every room. | On grade level work<br>Consistency across classrooms | Alignment |
| It's something that if it's implemented, like across all grade levels, like, and there's that vertical alignment, like things will work out, and things will get better in the long run. And in other words, like, kids will be learning what they need to know, they'll be able to have the skills that one grade level requires them to have, because they will build those over time. | Consistency across classrooms<br>On grade level work | Alignment |
| You know, we heard a lot early on, and we still do some at some points we heard a lot early on about our kids can't do this. It's too, it's too hard. They're not there, they're not able to do this. We're not going to get through half the book, because they just can't do it. And that was a reality for teachers. Like I'm not trying to put that down at all. It's how they felt. But it was it to me one of the benefits is that has proved to some of our adults, that they in fact can do this. Not only can they do this, they should do this. And I'm just so I'm just so thankful for that mind shift change in some of the adults | Hard curriculum<br>Student acquisition of skills | Rigor |
| I think it's also given our teachers a chance to network a little bit more, because they have something common to network over. | Professional Learning Community | Community of Teachers |

**Table 4.6** (continued)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I think our like having our peers is probably our that's the biggest thing that's been helpful though is for me | Working with peers | Community of Teachers |
| The PD was good when we could work with our counterparts at the other schools. That was great. Because another teacher and I had built a relationship just on talking about English IV curriculum. | Working with peers<br>Professional Learning Community<br>Professional Development | Community of Teachers |
| So, my frustration was not having that pre planning time before school started. Because my planning was in the moment, as I was going through the semester | Planning time | Time |
| I would say rushed in the beginning, but then overwhelming and then became more comfortable and got easier. | Rushed<br>Pacing | Time |

### *Questionnaire Findings*

My data collection began with the questionnaire that was administered in the second semester. At the time of the questionnaire, teachers had experienced an entire cycle of implementation. Riverbank School District high schools operate on a semester-long block schedule for the except for one school. East High School runs a year-long A/B day honors English and American History section. The teacher for this English class also teaches semester long block classes. Items 1–7 were demographic information questions. These were used to identify factors such as age, race, and years of teaching experience. Questions 8–13 and 15 were Likert scale questions designed to provide insight into teacher perceptions of the implementation process. Questions 14, 16, and 17 were open-ended questions that I used to probe deeper into the thinking behind the Likert scale responses. Question 18 asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group. Likert scale questions included four options with each assigned a numerical value. The options were: (1) strongly disagree, (2)

somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree, and (4) strongly agree. The full report with answer counts can be found in Appendix E. The Likert scale results are shown in Table 4.7 below.

**Table 4.7** - *Likert scale responses*

| Item | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Item 8 – I have a strong understanding of why the district decided to implement this curriculum. | 3.00 | 4.00 | 3.46 | .50 |
| Item 9 – I have received help or support in the implementation of this curriculum. | 3.00 | 4.00 | 3.69 | .46 |
| Item 10 – Implementing this curriculum has been stressful. | 2.00 | 4.00 | 2.92 | .62 |
| Item 11 – Teachers have been involved in the curriculum implementation process. | 3.00 | 4.00 | 3.31 | .46 |
| Item 12 – I have benefited professionally from the implementation of this curriculum. | 2.00 | 4.00 | 3.15 | .53 |
| Item 13 – I was provided resources to assist with the curriculum implementation | 2.00 | 4.00 | 3.38 | .62 |
| Item 15 – I have felt successful in the implementation of this curriculum. | 2.00 | 4.00 | 3.23 | .58 |

Based on the results of the Likert scale questions, the teachers' strongest area of agreement was found in Item 9. The majority of respondents selected strongly agree as their choice for having received help or support in this curriculum implementation. Responses to Item 10 indicated the majority of teachers did find the implementation to be stressful with 62% choosing somewhat agree. For Item 12, 69% of respondents selected somewhat agree indicating that they might have benefited from the curriculum implementation. Item 15 yielded a similar result with 62% selecting somewhat agree when asked if they felt successful in the implementation of the curriculum. Responses to Items 12 and 15 piqued my interest and made me eager to dig in and find out how teachers felt they had or had not benefitted professionally from the implementation and why they did or did not feel successful in the implementation of the curriculum. These two questions required respondents to make value-based judgements about

their personal involvement with the curriculum implementation and I believed a follow-up focus group, or interview would provide valuable insight into those perceptions (Saldaña, 2021).

The questionnaire asked for open-ended feedback on three questions. I included open-ended questions because this case study was a qualitative study and the open answers from the participants gave me their voice. I was able to compare the questionnaire responses to the first semester historical documents. I saw that responses regarding feelings of anxiousness were similar but less intense in the second semester. These questions provided me an insight into deeper thoughts and feelings than Likert scale responses. I included the emergent theoretically-informed patterns from the open-ended responses in the codebook.

Item 14 asked respondents to describe their overall perception of the implementation. Responses ranged from "it's been an easy implementation" to "the implementation of the new curriculum felt rushed. The beginning of the year was hectic and stressful, and I did not feel properly equipped to begin using the new resources and curriculum at first." Multiple teachers mentioned working with other teachers during professional development sessions and outside of those sessions. Two teachers mentioned their reservations about the curriculum being able to prepare students for state-mandated assessments with one saying "overall, I feel that the curriculum implementation process has been relatively smooth, though I have reservations about the ability for the new curriculum to adequately prepare our students in tested subject areas." Another teacher who started after the school year began said they initially felt the curriculum was "just thrown on [them]" but went on to say that after they were able to spend time with the curriculum, they developed a better understanding.

Item 16 asked teachers what they would have done differently in the implementation. Some of the themes that emerged were the need for more time to learn the curriculum, allow

more teacher autonomy, and providing more training on the additional resources in the curriculum. Overwhelmingly, the most frequently mentioned theme was time. One respondent stated they wished they, "had more time for the teachers to learn the curriculum." Another suggested providing more planning time for teachers to "dig in" to the curriculum. Two respondents mentioned they would have liked more time on the front-end to learn the curriculum. They noted it felt very rushed, stating:

> While we were not expected to jump in on day one, it did seem that there was pressure to begin before we were fully able to explore the curriculum. I believe this could have been done in one of two ways. First, having received the curriculum earlier in the summer could have allowed for us to better prepare before school started. The second option could have been to hold off on immediate implementation and allow first semester PD and PLC days to be used for collaboration amongst teachers with an expectation of implementation in second semester. We were able to work together and build the plane as we were flying it, but this did add some stress to the implementation process.

Two respondents stated they would not have done anything differently. One respondent taught a similar curriculum in the previous school year and felt they just needed to make some adjustments along the way. Finally, one teacher noted that communication prior to the arrival of the curriculum was limited but they felt the implementation had been done properly.

The final open-ended question simply asked if there was anything else they would like to share with me regarding the curriculum implementation. Most did not have anything else to add but there were some comments of note. One teacher stated they felt guilty about the vast amount of the curriculum that had to be skipped due to the time constraints of the semester. They offered suggestions for how to save money using a similar resource offered by the same curriculum

company. Another respondent mentioned teacher autonomy saying, “while the curriculum is of good quality, I would like more teacher autonomy to use content in conjunction with the curriculum.”

> Other respondents mentioned their hopes for future use of the curriculum. They stated: Now that we have had time to use and become more familiar with the curriculum, I believe that instruction will continue to improve…The more time we have to collaborate and share these ideas, the more we will be able to get out of the curriculum. While there is still some stress and many aspects that I am not fully able to use yet, I think that will be alleviated as we continue to collaborate as a department as district.

Another respondent said that they appreciated the hard work that had been poured into the implementation and that they believe there are many layers of complexity that teachers do not see. They went on to express concern about alignment to the state assessment saying that the curriculum seems to be better aligned with Advanced Placement exams. The questionnaire gave me a solid initial glance into the thought processes of the teachers and all 13 respondents said they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group.

**Theoretical Framework and Emergent Themes**

The questionnaire provided some data that helped answer the research questions but the majority of the data came from the interviews and focus groups. Using the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model as the theoretical framework, I aligned participant responses to the research questions to deepen my understanding of the research questions:

1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?

2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

The interview protocol questions addressed the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model components as outlined in Table 4.8

**Table 4.8** - *Interview protocol and theoretical framework*

| Lippitt-Knoster Change Model Component | Question |
|---|---|
| Vision | 3 |
| Consensus | 3, 6 |
| Skills | 5, 9, 10, 11 |
| Incentives | 7, 9 |
| Resources | 4, 5, 8, 9, 10 |
| Action Plan | 5, 9, 10, 12 |

In addition to the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, other themes emerged during the coding process. I coded them and they intersected with the theoretical framework. The emergent themes are significant as they also appear in curriculum implementation literature as consistent themes. The emergent themes were discussed across all focus groups and individual interviews.

Teachers, district leaders, and principals discussed the growth of the community of teachers. These existed in both formal and informal structures. Teachers discussed the communication, alignment, and professional growth they experienced as part of the community. Principals and district leaders discussed how they had seen bonds strengthen both in the school buildings and across the district. Although there were a few issues at times, all participants found the growth of the community of teachers to be a positive point throughout the implementation.

Participants discussed onboarding at great length. Most appreciated the district-provided newsletters and pacing guides but a few felt they were too stringent and did not allow for enough

flexibility and teacher autonomy. Professional development was considered to be positive in the onboarding process, but some felt it could have been structured differently to make the most impact. All participants wanted more information about the resources that were not covered in the pacing guides and in the initial professional development.

Rigor was mentioned throughout the interviews and focus groups. Many agreed the curriculum was selected in part because it is rigorous. Many teachers felt the students were unprepared for the rigor of the curriculum. A few teachers mentioned they did not understand some of what the curriculum was asking, and they had to study and learn the concepts before they could teach it to the students. Principals and district leaders were pleased by the rigor component of the curriculum and felt it brought equity of instruction to all classrooms.

Time was a huge factor for all participants. The curriculum was approved and purchased immediately before the beginning of the school year, which did not leave time for extensive pre-planning and professional development. Most teachers believed the implementation was too fast, and they needed time to study the curriculum and adjust their teaching. Teachers universally wanted more time to plan and prepare for the implementation. Principals and district leaders also felt it was a fast implementation, but they agreed the district's student achievement results warranted an implementation that happened sooner rather than later. In this sub-section, I discuss the theoretical framework and the emergent themes.

### *Lippitt-Knoster Change Model*

The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model provides a theoretical framework for curriculum implementation as this is a change in the practices of a school or district. According to the model, change must encompass all six components: vision, consensus, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan to have a successful result. If a component is missing or flawed, the

change process could be derailed and is marked by confusion, sabotage, anxiety, resistance, false starts, and frustration. Tables 4.9 and 4.10 show the number of coding references across focus groups and interviews.

**Table 4.9 -** *Lippitt-Knoster coding references*

| Codes | Number of coding references | Component and Result Codes | Aggregate number of coding references |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vision | 28 | Vision & Confusion | 39 |
| Confusion | 11 | | |
| Consensus | 48 | Consensus & Sabotage | 64 |
| Sabotage | 16 | | |
| Skills | 35 | Skills & Anxiety | 66 |
| Anxiety | 31 | | |
| Incentives | 40 | Incentives & Resistance | 62 |
| Resistance | 22 | | |
| Action Plan | 55 | Action Plan & False Starts | 99 |
| False Starts | 44 | | |
| Resources | 59 | Resources & Frustration | 109 |
| Frustration | 50 | | |

**Table 4.10** – *Emergent themes*

| Codes | Aggregate number of coding references |
|---|---|
| Autonomy | 48 |
| Rigor | 46 |
| Time | 40 |
| Community of Teachers | 38 |
| Alignment | 37 |
| Onboarding | 33 |
| Professional Growth | 28 |
| Communication | 25 |
| Newsletter | 14 |

### *Vision/Confusion*

Vision is what it looks like when an organization has achieved its goals (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). To select an appropriate high school English curriculum, stakeholders had to agree upon what we wanted to accomplish. Teachers and leaders used the student achievement

data from state and national assessments to discuss what was lacking in student achievement. Principals discussed what they were and were not seeing in the classroom. The group talked about statements from our higher education partners and what students were lacking when they entered college classes. The questionnaire results showed 100% of respondents had a strong understanding of why the district decided to implement this curriculum. I was able to glean more information from the interviews and focus groups to support this data.

Participants felt strongly that the reason the curriculum was selected was to aid in aligning resources to the standards, to provide commonalities across all high school English classes in the district, and to increase rigor of instruction. This relates to the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act language for serving students: "Equity and excellence by focusing on the achievement and opportunity gaps among students, especially those who are historically underserved" (Ansorger, 2021 p. 3). Lisa, a beginning teacher from East High School said:

> consistency and grade level alignment as far as vertical alignment from grade to grade. And also, one of the goals were also to have new teachers coming in, who may not have an idea, you know about exactly where they would like to start or began, it gives them a starting point, as far as teaching is concerned, and also with the ultimate goal of increasing test scores, by having that consistency and that rigor there for learning.

Eva, a mid-career teacher from West High School, described the need to "to increase rigor, and to push our students, especially after COVID beyond what they think they're capable of." Several teachers also mentioned the need for a strong writing curriculum which had been noted as a deficit in student achievement data. Liam, a recent addition to his high school noted, "I would say probably because writing skills are just so lacking right now on the student level."

District leaders spoke the most about vision. They discussed the district's need to improve its reading instruction in all grade levels, using a curriculum resource that is aligned to the standards and requires the teachers to teach the correct content at the correct grade level. One director, Brenda, believes the district will see huge gains in student achievement over the next three years because of the curriculum adoption.

Principals felt the same. Veteran high school principal Jasmine said:

> I know that we were looking for something for vertical alignment for K-12. Something that would transcend across grade levels. For High School, specifically, the looking at our test scores, seeing that we were stagnant in several areas and what we needed to do to come together as a district to improve our instructional practices in our classrooms.

This aligns with Fulmer and Turner's research around challenging instruction. The authors say students must experience higher-level thinking within the classroom where students engage in discussion and must explain and justify their responses. These methods allow students to apply their knowledge in complex and meaningful ways by making connections and constructing new ideas (Fulmer & Turner, 2014). Other principals agreed on the need for continuity across the district. One of the reasons the principals believed that continuity was important was to better serve the student population which is transient between high schools, which is a characteristic of low-wealth districts (Ansorger, 2021).

In the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, if stakeholders do not understand the vision, there will be confusion which could derail the process. Confusion was coded in two of the focus groups for a total of four instances and more heavily in two of the individual interviews with seven instances. Notably, in these two interviews, there were zero instances of knowing the vision for the curriculum adoption and three notations of confusion in each interview. In one

interview, teachers were unaware the curriculum had been adopted. They had not been involved in the selection process and did not know the district was implementing until they returned to school in the fall. Daniel, a new teacher, started school after the year had begun and the curriculum was already in use. When asked about his understanding of why the curriculum had been adopted, the participant stated, “I was actually unsure. Part of me still feels like I'm halfway unsure. But what I kind of heard was that the district felt like it needed to do a change.” Since vision was strong in both the survey and in the interviews and focus groups, it is plausible that confusion would not show as strongly.

### *Consensus/Sabotage*

Consensus occurs when agreement is reached between all stakeholders and everyone begins working towards a common goal. A key tenant of consensus is for dialogue to remain open between the stakeholders. When there is open communication, adjustments can be made as needed throughout the change rather than waiting until the issue has derailed the change process (Knoster et al., 2000). Consensus was one of the top three components mentioned throughout the interviews and focus groups with 48 coding references. While its counterpart, sabotage was one of the lowest mentioned with 16 references. Communication was a mid emergent theme for all participants with 25 instances. Participants were interested in discussing communication from the district to the teachers, from teachers to teachers, and from school leaders to the district and to teachers. Communication was an integral piece of the implementation process and thus, achieving consensus.

Multiple teachers and all principals discussed being part of the selection process for new curriculum. They enjoyed previewing the resources, attending the vendor presentations, and the subsequent discussions with their colleagues. Teachers who were not in attendance at district

events reviewed curriculum with the other teachers at their schools. Only one school site did not have teachers in attendance at the preview meetings and those teachers did not note vision or consensus in their interviews.

Out of the focus groups and interviews, principals discussed consensus the most with a 22% coverage rate in the discussion. District leaders were the next highest coverage with 5.75% of the discussion. Principal Jasmine said, “I think bringing the teachers in at the beginning to help the selection process and letting them be a part of the process all the way through also helped with the buy in.” Principal Leah discussed how consensus was nurtured and maintained throughout the school year:

> I really like what y'all did with the teachers of letting them come together to kind of be able to pace in in [sic] the common assessments and stuff like that. And I think that's much more powerful than us sitting down and doing that and bringing it to them. So I think it takes us out of it, which is hard, because we're not all in it. But I think it's much more powerful for the teacher.

Principal Patti noted:

> I have just enjoyed listening to their different discussions about it and their thoughts and I think it's given them more as a department in their group discussions. You know, one person that absolutely would jump on [the curriculum] and the others that kind of were naysayers. They hear this person talking. So, they're like, ‘Well, I'm not going to let them up me’ because I have a lot of competition going on in the English department. Everybody wants to be the top, most advanced.

Teachers in the West High School group also had multiple discussions around consensus. The lead teacher, Eva, said:

> I can hear my department doing what I know, they should be doing. I can hear him teaching. I can hear her teaching. I know what I'm doing in my room. So on my side of the building, I'm like, Okay, we're rocking this stuff. Because like, we're all using our books, we're all pulling materials. Conversations are the same. Like she said, ethos, pathos, logos, I can hear it in him. I'm like, okay, I know they're doing it in English II so III, and IV are going to get it too. So I think personally, like, I feel okay with it now. And I have a good grasp on what I think the curriculum asked me to do. And I feel like as a department, as a whole, we do here.

At Central High School, teacher Todd addressed consensus. He discussed feeling how he added value through his work with the district team on the curriculum guides. During that work, he formed professional relationships with his colleagues, and they worked closely during the PLC meetings and virtually to refine the lesson selection and the pacing.

There were moments of sabotage which came mostly when teachers felt their autonomy was being taken away because of the restrictive nature of a packaged curriculum. At West High School, the focus group as a whole expressed concerns about alignment of the curriculum to the state assessment. This ran as a constant thread throughout the focus group session. Principals noted some of their more experienced teachers did not want to let go of what they had been doing. Teachers tend to be more inclined to sabotage when they feel they are being evaluated, pressured by the curriculum, and responsible for students performing to high standards (Fulmer & Turner, 2014). Principal Leah discussed how the teachers continually asked her if we were going to continue the curriculum into the next school year. She said, “I can tell they don’t trust it. They’re feeling it out to see if it is another bandwagon. They’re waiting for us to be like, well, just don’t worry about it.”

I received the most feedback about straying from the curriculum from the more experienced teachers in the group. Statements such as, “I did a lot of stories from the past because I knew they worked” and “I went back and forth. We would try a week with the new curriculum” let me know there was hesitancy around using the new curriculum. Holly, a mid-career teacher, mentioned her frustration over how others were not implementing the curriculum:

I think it is really hard when you like, you have staff members who are busting their butt to learn the curriculum. And then others who just kind of say, well, we're not gonna do it because I can't or I choose not to, or I don't have the support for whatever reasons. So I think that is hard when you know how much extra you have to put in. And if one person is not helping everybody, everyone's getting pushed back. There was agreement from the rest of the focus group when Holly vented her frustration. These moments of sabotage from colleagues could have derailed the entire process but the group as a whole talked about how they pushed through and the implementation continued throughout the entire school year.

***Skills/Anxiety***

In this implementation study, participants were concerned about their ability to effectively and successfully implement a new curriculum. They described the process of curriculum implementation using words like anxiety and stress. A key component of skills development was the professional development (PD) teachers attended prior to the start of the semester. District leaders were concerned about skills and anxiety with a 7.45% coding coverage in their focus group transcript. They used words and phrases including fear and tempering expectations. Brenda, one of the grade span directors, discussed the importance of the PD in helping teachers feel supported and gain necessary skills. She mentioned not feeling as though they had enough professional development ahead of time but acknowledged it takes time to learn

any new curriculum. Another grade span director, Faith, discussed tempering teacher expectations:

> I think we had a role too, in just helping them manage a kind of psychological part of implementation. Knowing how to balance accountability and inspecting and monitoring the implementation, but also helping teachers almost temper their own expectations. I think that maybe one of the more challenging pieces at times was just trying to help teachers understand, yes, you have to be learning this, you have to be using it, but it's okay to pace yourself.

District leaders agreed with each other that building teachers' skills and confidence throughout the year was key to a successful implementation.

Some teachers felt the PD was exactly what was needed while others did not see the immediate relevance to the implementation. Olivia, a teacher with over twenty years of experience, was on the initial curriculum selection team. She said, "our training had to be a little sparse and quick. I mean, you know, this was where we really took off from and hit the ground running." Tracy, a mid-career teacher, had been part of a curriculum implementation in another district and appreciated the focus on PD in Riverbank School District.

> That 'trainer' showed us everything that was in that book. It wasn't, here let me show you how to make the most amazing lesson plan you've ever seen in one thing. It was here, let me show you what all is in the book and what all this stuff means.

Professional development was described as both helpful and not helpful in the three teacher focus groups. It was helpful because the trainers showed teachers how to utilize the resources, but it was unhelpful when their expectations for the training did not align with the reality of the training content.

Curriculum implementations are stressful as they involve new resources, new ways of teaching and assessing, and expectations for usage (Larson et al., 2018). Work overload can occur when individuals feel their abilities are insufficient to meet the demands of the task. This is increased in schools that serve higher needs populations. While several teachers discussed how the resource made their planning process easier, several mentioned the time teachers had to invest in learning the resource. Georgia, a mid-career teacher, talked about using the summer to attend the planning meetings and "get better prepared for next year." Olivia said that "implementing a new curriculum is stressful regardless but this implementation was a pretty big shift." One of the principals observed "growing pains" and "panic," especially in the state-tested areas. Stella, an early career teacher said, "well, I mean, there's always the pressure of wanting to perform."

Skills and anxiety were mentioned across all focus groups and interviews. The groups' focus on lack of skills, acquisition of skills, and the ensuing anxiety that comes as a result of change align with current curriculum implementation research (Boston & Wilhelm, 2017; Larson et al., 2018; McCoy et al., 2020). Teachers are more likely to feel an increase in their skill level when they see the connection between their everyday practice and the new curriculum (McCoy et al., 2019). In this study, high quality professional learning that is timely and relevant was one of the keys to lessening teacher anxiety and increasing skill acquisition. Teachers and leaders also discussed increasing skills and decreasing anxiety through time to explore and become more familiar with the curriculum.

### *Incentives/Resistance*

Incentives are often thought of as tangible rewards designed to change or encourage behavior. In the instance of curriculum implementation, incentives are more often intrinsic and

focused on connecting teacher actions to professional outcomes (Lang, 2018). Without the presence of incentives, initiatives such as curriculum implementation are likely to meet resistance. Teachers are more inclined to implement curriculum with fidelity if there is a perceived benefit throughout the implementation process (Clayback et al., 2022). Incentives had a high coverage rate across all focus groups and interviews.

District leaders found the curriculum implementation itself to be a benefit. None of the leaders in the room had been through a Kindergarten through 12th grade full-scale math and reading curriculum implementation prior to this year. Now all of them have multiple curriculum implementations in their scope of experience. Grace talked about the benefits of having a common resource during technology PD sessions. The common resource allows all participants the opportunity to go back to their own school and replicate what was learned because they all have access to the same materials. Professional development was another perceived benefit. All the directors agreed the embedded professional development was beneficial to both the teachers and the district staff. Faith talked about "learning alongside the teachers" and Brenda talked about the opportunity for teachers to network with each other across schools. Faith followed up by saying, "they have really bonded across schools and they really have started to rely on one another in a way that I may not have anticipated."

Grace mentioned rigor as another intangible benefit:

> We heard a lot early on, and we still do at some points, we heard a lot early on about our kids can't do this. It's too hard. They're not able to do this. I'm not trying to put that down at all, it's how they felt. But, it was a benefit that this has proved to some of our adults that they in fact, can do this. And I'm just so thankful for that mindshift change in some of the adults.

Rigor was mentioned multiple times in the teacher groups as well. Holly, a mid-career teacher at East High School, stated:

> it was most rewarding to see the foundation of skills that kids need to be able to do when they choose to take AP courses and college level. They're getting what they need to be more successful later on at an earlier stage.

At West High School, Eva noted the new materials pushed her students further. She said:

> Okay, I get it now. Like, I get why we're changing this. And I understand like, the questions that they're asking in the book, and I see where my students are lacking. So that way we can help the younger students pick it up. So, when they get to that English IV level, they're not lacking anymore.

Others in the focus group nodded in agreement as Eva was speaking. Tracy said, "I feel like when I answer when I ask harder questions, I'm getting better answers, deeper answers. I feel like I'm heading in the right direction. So for me, I feel like that's success." The discussions around rigor also aligned with the vision of the curriculum adoption. Referring to the sections on vision and consensus, one of the beliefs was the curriculum was adopted to bring about more rigorous instruction in high school English classrooms.

This curriculum presented several teachers with the challenge of learning something new. While this could also be a frustrating process, the new curriculum challenged teachers to expand their skillset and examine their teaching repertoire. Freddy, a fairly new teacher talked about teaching new material:

> When you're kind of forced to teach the things that you might be less passionate about, it really gets you to dive into the nitty gritty of your teaching style, and what your ability

> level is, as a teacher. So, I've kind of enjoyed teaching things that I would not normally have chosen. Because it's gotten me to think outside the box.

Other teachers agreed with Freddy and nodded in agreement. Oliva talked about:

> …the benefit of kind of being able to maybe evaluate a little more closely and scrutinize the value of what you're doing, you know, like, how is this activity fit into, you know, the whole puzzle? And is this something that really is helping my students achieve the end product?

One of the more experienced teachers said:

> I think it challenged me to try something new. You know, you get to a point in your teaching career and you're you're [sic] comfortable with what you're teaching and you know, it like the back of your hand. And it's, you know, it's, I think that's probably it. It definitely challenged me.

While many of the teachers found the challenges of the new curriculum to be an incentive, principals found equity within the curriculum. The principals envisioned the curriculum was implemented to bring high quality resources to all classrooms regardless of teacher experience or skill level and acknowledged that the curriculum levels the playing field. Several teachers mentioned the benefit of having a quality resource as an incentive.

This was especially true among the early career teachers. Lisa, a teacher in her first three years, discussed how it eased her mental load:

> If you know that you have something to start with, like for me that that saves a lot of room. Because sometimes I don't have the marbles or the mental or emotional space to like, think creatively about a lesson. And all of that is occupied by just like, determining what they're going to be doing, what standards it's for, and how I'm going to implement

> it. So, if you have something that's like, a base level of this is what we need to be doing. Like that. I now have so much extra space in my brain for like, adapting things for creativity, for differentiation, for figuring out how I'm going to scaffold something for an assignment, it leaves room for all those very important things that sometimes don't happen, because you're too busy trying to figure out what am I use? Where am I gonna get it?

Lucas, a beginning teacher talked about having the core already there so he could build upon the unit: “It's much easier when I already know where I'm starting and where I’m taking off from, so it helps a lot.” This lessening of the mental load is especially important in a rural, low-wealth setting, where resources are not as prevalent and there are more beginning and alternatively licensed staff (Ansorger, 2021).

Although there seemed to be more discussion for the incentives of the curriculum, resistance was voiced as well especially among more experienced teachers. Resistance had a 3% coverage rate in the East High School interview. Margaret, a teacher leader, was concerned about the lack of flexibility and autonomy in the curriculum implementation. She shared, “I think that to sum it all up, autonomy and flexibility is what I think that I would love to hear, and you can just say it to me so I'll feel good.” Eliza, a mid-career teacher felt the same:

> I didn't, it was a feeling of like, personal autonomy was being pulled. And then so it was like, well, we've built these units. We teach these things. We've written grants for these books we've taught; can we not teach these anymore? And that was really frustrating at first.

Another mid-career teacher, Liam, echoed that concern:

> I constantly do new things, new texts, and new just kind of like ways to work with stuff and I felt a little bit stifled by the book. You know, because there's not really as much choice that goes into it.

Autonomy and choice is described as an “enduring challenge” in curriculum implementation (Stornaiuolo et al., 2023). It proved to be no different in the implementation studied in Riverbank School District.

The principals recognized the resistance in their own staffs throughout the year with a 4% coverage rate in their focus group. Patti stated:

> You did have most of your naysayers were the ones who had been in education for a while and didn't want to let go of what they were doing. Thinking that they were going to have to go by this book. And I think that it was just addressing those fears to begin with. West High School had a lot of naysayers, that didn't want to give that up. And, you know, you just had to be blunt with them and say, look, what we're doing is not working.

Jasmine noted the differences in resistance in experienced versus less experienced staff:

> We have a veteran English teacher, and we have a fairly new teacher that worked really closely together. The newer teacher was super excited to have it and was taking it in like a sponge. And then you have the veteran teacher who has done some things that have worked really, really well, and how to pull in this now mandated piece, but also be able to plug in the stuff that she knows works at the same time, and balance that out and making sure she's not breaking the district rules at the same time of implementing. And I think that that was a growing pain that really caused some anxiety but was also helped by listening to the feedback.

Some teachers shared they were resistant to using the materials as presented due to concerns of misalignment to the NC Standard Course of Study. Margaret mentioned:

> That scares me when you have new teachers coming in as English II teachers, because they have no clue as to what that assessment looks like at the end. But they're doing what they're supposed to be doing in the curriculum but if they continue with that without some guidance, and just going through the curriculum is gonna be like a hot mess scorewise.

For a district labeled low-performing, the impetus to perform at higher levels can be overwhelming. The scrutiny on each teacher of a tested subject is intense and the desire to perform is high. Tracy said, “my test scores were good. You know, my test scores were good. I think that's a thing that you find a lot with teachers. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.”

### *Action Plan/False Starts*

The action plan provides the blueprint for the implementation effort and key points for measurement and without it, implementations experience false starts (Kirchner, 2023). A solid framework for an action plan provides guidance for all teachers and leaders involved in implementation (Segedin, 2018). Frequent monitoring ensured that the implementation action plan was being followed. The action plan was the most discussed element in the district leader focus group with a 20% coverage rate. This curriculum implementation began with the curriculum selection process that took place in spring 2023. District leaders brought in principals, teacher leaders, curriculum specialists, and digital learning specialists in teams to preview and rate curriculum. Their strategy in bringing in large numbers of stakeholders was to increase an understanding of the vision for curriculum implementation and to build consensus and buy-in around the new curriculum.

From there, the curriculum recommendations had to be sent to the superintendent and eventually to the school board for approval. While the grade span directors were waiting for final approval, they began matching prioritized standards guides from the new curriculum to the current district pacing and resource guides. The curriculum purchase was approved in early August and the timeline moved very quickly from there with teachers returning less than three weeks after the board approval. Faith described the implementation process as "a roller coaster."

One of the most challenging pieces of executing the action plan was the timing. Faith went on to say:

> I think the timing of the implementation was stressful in that ideally, if we had had a little more time on the front end, before we actually pushed resources out, and we could have trained lead teacher, you know, that would have been an ideal scenario. But having said that, I wouldn't have traded it off. Like when we got it, we needed it. So, it wouldn't even have been a question for me. Like, oh, well, let's train for a semester and train lead teachers. And no, we needed to, it was kind of like strike while the iron was hot, as they say, but I think the timing was stressful and challenging, just because it was a very quick turnaround.

Brenda described the tasks involved in the action plan:

> Writing and pacing guides, that was work that we did, we wrote pacing guides, with key teachers or specialists to make sure that teachers really were ready. They had everything at their fingertips, not just their materials, but what order to teach things in and where to, you know, where to find everything. So, and then scheduling the professional development that was ongoing all year for all grade spans.

Monitoring is an important part of an action plan. The grade span directors mentioned that specifically during their focus group. Sophia said:

> From the district perspective to it was making sure that the principals were inspecting what we expected, and staying on top of the principals that staying on top of the principals to ensure that they were making sure that it's being implemented in the classrooms, and that it was showing up in the lesson plans and that, like you mentioned walkthroughs earlier that they were doing walkthroughs and seeing the curriculum being implemented. I mean, because you could implement it, but if no one comes to see it, or no one expects to see it, then it won't be implemented.

Several teachers mentioned working on pacing guides and how that helped them with the curriculum. The district sent a regular newsletter that outlined at what point the teachers should be that week. Some teachers found that helpful, Freddy said:

> I think that the newsletter that you send out, it's very helpful for pacing, because it makes us a priority. I'm really able to make sure I'm on target. When I see that come through, and it's week eight and we're on week eight lessons, so that makes me feel validated. Like I'm doing something right.

The teachers in his focus group agreed with him. Other teachers found the newsletters to be both helpful and stressful at the same time. They felt the pressure of having to stay on track when they wanted to go back and reteach a lesson or to add in another resource. Margaret did not find the newsletter helpful and said it added to her stress. Principals, as a whole, appreciated the newsletter. They found it to be a quick reference tool that they could use during classroom walkthroughs and school level professional learning communities.

The district used the curriculum-provided prioritized pacing guide to set the lessons for the semester. Throughout the semester, teachers worked on the district-specific pacing guides. They took information from the national prioritized curriculum guide and tailored it to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. The more experienced teachers mentioned they felt an important role in the action plan was working on the curriculum guides. Eva talked about working on the pacing guides and being able to make pacing adjustments after teaching the curriculum lessons. Todd also felt his time was better spent working on the pacing guides, "…with the curriculum guides and deciding on some of those things, it was okay, we've had this, we've been working on it, and we're seeing how it works. And it felt more productive in those stages." The feelings of unease and unfamiliarity led to some false starts with the curriculum.

False starts occurred when teachers were frustrated with the new curriculum. They felt the implementation happened too quickly and they did not have time to adjust. Holly was tasked with assisting a long-term substitute with some of the English courses she did not teach. Her frustration came when she did not have the support of other teachers in the district when planning for those lessons. She also talked about teachers who deviated from the curriculum:

> When I think about like teachers who have more than one content level prep. It makes sense why so many experienced teachers had to deviate, because they couldn't survive the amount of workload to implement two curriculums at the same time.

Margaret talked about some of the pre-work that she felt was lacking saying:

> I do not feel successful with the implementation of this process. Because after getting into I realized the amount of pre-work that probably should have occurred for English II for English II only that was not there. You know, and I just, I just felt that we needed a little more for English II than just to, you know, to go into the curriculum.

Teachers did not feel as if they had time to properly prepare for the implementation. There were several comments that supported these feelings from multiple focus group interviews. Eva said:

> I felt like in the beginning, it was really rushed. And it was like, okay, we have to have you guys do this. And, okay, why? Because we have to change what we're doing. Okay. But I think all three of us have the expectation that because we're going to do it, the kids are going to do it and do it. Well. Huh, anyways, but it was just rushed in the beginning.

Others nodded as she was talking. In the same focus group, Freddy echoed the concern about time:

> But I think the buildup was just a little abrupt, a kind of a surprise, instead of a smooth lifeline. Tell you in September, we're going to do a new curriculum next September and kind of pace from there and train from there. I think that would have been a lot more easily digested.

One of the groups that struggled with the action plan was the teacher team from the Early College. They began school two weeks before the traditional high schools and the materials had not arrived at that time. They were unable to attend the professional development sessions because their students were already in session. For this group, implementation was particularly difficult. Georgia, a late career teacher, summed it up with her statement:

> I think the implementation was maybe a little more difficult for us, just because we were already, you know, so much into the school year. And that happens a lot at the Early College. We're always off schedule you know, and a lot of, you know, we miss a lot of the professional development and things like that, because, you know, we're in a classroom.

In summary, the teachers articulated the action plan in the same way as the principals and district leaders. The teachers put more emphasis on the time that was lacking to fully prepare for a fall implementation. District leaders, principals, and teachers overwhelmingly appreciated the pacing newsletter that was released every few weeks, although some teachers found this stressful. Teachers put greater value on working on the pacing guides which gave them ownership into the lesson selection and the order of the units. Every focus group discussed how much more comfortable they were with the curriculum, the pacing, and adjusting for NCSCOS alignment in the second semester.

***Resources/Frustration***

When the district leadership began the search for an English Language Arts curriculum, they were looking for a high-quality resource that contained standards-aligned lessons, teacher resources for instruction, a strong writing component, and differentiation opportunities for advanced learners, exceptional children, and English Learners. In low-wealth communities, students lack access to expert teachers, individualized attention, and high quality curriculum materials (Ansorger, 2021). It was interesting to note two teachers mentioned their concerns with how much the resources cost and if the district would be able to sustain the purchase. Jack, a veteran principal liked the resource because, “I'd say it was as many new teachers as you have, or as many young teachers, maybe less experienced you have, it levels the playing field. It gives them just gives them a playbook to go by.” The primary purpose of the curriculum adoption was to put a high quality, standards-aligned curriculum in every classroom across the district to provide equitable instruction for all students.

When asked what resources were provided to help you with the curriculum implementation, many respondents mentioned the teacher and student books. Rosalyn, a new

teacher who was beginning a second career, was thankful for the books because the "teacher's book that basically walked [her] through the lessons step by step." She went on to say new teachers "don't have a lot of things that we have used in the past to pull from, you know." Tracy discussed the implementation book that came with the initial professional development session:

> That manual that he handed us that first day, oh, my Lord, that has helped me a great deal. That whatever money y'all spent on that was money well spent. It has helped me create lessons better than what I would have done from just the teacher manual from the book.

From the historical survey, a teacher wrote, "since I don't have years of fodder or tons of tried and true resources, a curriculum like this one has been helpful for me."

One of the greatest benefits to teachers was the expansion of their professional community. District leaders, high school principals, and high school teachers felt that the expansion of the district wide professional community was a great benefit of the curriculum implementation. People are a resource. In a time when teaching positions go unfilled for months or even the whole year, retention of teachers is critical. District leaders said that the leadership team was an important resource as they supported and leaned on each other throughout the implementation process.

The teachers expressed how they leaned on the community of teachers to grow in their understanding of the curriculum and how they helped each other through the process. Community of teachers emerged as a subgroup during the inductive coding passes. From East High School, teachers talked about the strength of their school level PLC and how helpful it was to have each other. Lisa said, "I think having the books has been good. I think having our peers is probably, that's the biggest thing that's been helpful." At West High School, Tracy described

the district-level PLCs and conversations as more of a roundtable discussion where teachers could exchange ideas. Liam discussed the value of the school level PLC and having a common resource to discuss. At Central High School, Todd also talked about the district level PLCs and the value of the conversations:

> …because that's where we all would agree most of the benefit of those meetings came in. Okay, you're doing this as well. You teach differently. I see, what's working for you? What's working for you? What are we struggling with? And we worked through that together.

At our non-traditional settings, teachers discussed how the PLC would have helped them. Since the Early College does not run the same workdays as the traditional high school, they missed those face-to-face interactions but reached out via email. Georgia said, “That was helpful just to have somebody to kind of reach out to and be like, hey, how are you doing this at your school?” Teachers at the alternative school are often singletons in their building. Stella said:

> I did feel like I belong to a group in that sense. In that sense, it was nice to feel like part of the team. That's what I was gonna say earlier, because it needs to be noted that this school, I'm the only high school English teacher, yeah, so I don't have other teachers to, you know, collaborate with or just even talk discuss the curriculum. So it was it is nice, because of those meetings it's facilitated, like, you know, relationships with other English teachers. I do feel comfortable just reaching out and saying, Hey, and asking them questions, right, the other from other schools, and these people I don't really know, I didn't know before, up until now. So that's been key for me.

Leaders described how they had seen teachers come together to work on curriculum and how the bonds formed across school buildings had grown. Jack talked about the changes he had seen over the years:

> That was a major problem that one school was not working with other schools and one teacher not working with other teachers and so forth. So, this has actually been something that through my entire career in Riverbank School District. It's been a concern and we're now achieving it.

Leah talked about the professional value of the PLCs saying

> I really like what y'all did with the teachers of letting them come together to kind of be able to pace in in the common assessments and stuff like that. And I think that's much more powerful than us sitting down and doing that, and bringing it to them. So, I think it takes us out of it, which is hard, because we're not all in it. But I think it's much more powerful for the teacher.

Professional learning was another topic discussed within resources. District leaders believed the professional development occurred prior to product purchase with one stating, “I feel like we had professional development on all their products before we ever even purchased a product so that we could know the ins and outs before making that big decision.” Teachers, with few exceptions, felt the professional development sessions during the opening workdays was helpful. Lisa also found the professional development to be helpful stating, “the part that was actually helpful in trying to implement it was having the I guess the people come and kind of show and kind of demonstrate some of the things that were actually done in the classroom.” Stella enjoyed the training saying:

> Helpful would probably be the training was embedded in it, you didn't just give us materials. Because that gave us a broader perspective of, you know, kind of what it was all about, or why it was designed the way it was designed.

Other teachers found more value in peer-to-peer collaboration than in formalized professional development. Todd said, “I think more so than any training, honestly, that we've gotten, I think the, you know, collaboration with colleagues has probably been more helpful really then for me than any training that I think we've really done.” From the questionnaire:

> “I think the required PDs could have been beneficial to us teachers if we weren't told about planning and were actually able to dig deep into the curriculum instead. Just providing a planning time would have been more beneficial than telling teachers how planning should happen.

Anecdotally, the teachers did not find value in the mid-year professional development session delivered by the company’s trainers. They would have preferred to use that time to collaborate and to discuss the pacing and lessons.

With resources came frustration. I found an overlay in frustration with the resources and resistance to the implementation. Frustration and resistance often came as an overlap within the same response to a question. A primary frustration was with the timing of the resources. Time emerged as a code in the inductive coding process. Because the approval came the same month as the start of school, resources arrived at school just ahead of students or, as shipments were delayed, after students arrived on campus. This left the teachers feeling that they did not have enough time to learn about the resources before they had to teach using them. Although the district did not expect the lessons to start until week three, many teachers felt the frustration of

not having time to explore the resources as they were also having to plan lessons and teach during this grace period.

Two teachers, Todd and Olivia, elaborated on this in their focus group. Todd expressed his frustration saying:

> Had we gotten the materials at the end of last school year or the beginning of July, or to where we had more time to prepare ourselves. Then it got delayed, and we didn't get it until three weeks into the school year. And then we're trying to figure out how to implement as we're already teaching.

From the same school, Olivia nodded and said:

> I don't know that time would have necessarily helped but it's hard when you do have teachers that are, very much, they plan by the by the nine weeks or even by the semester. I mean, they've already got a map laid out. For teachers like that, I'm quite certain the lack of time and the quick turnaround and not having the materials so far in advance. I think that was probably really…

Todd agreed: “As one of those. Yes, yes.” Olivia continued

> Like I said, I'm not one of those but I do know there are people like that that just…but like I said, I know getting the materials after we had already started the semester, that was tough for those personalities.

This concept came up at multiple schools’ focus group sessions. At East High School Margaret explained, “I would think that implementing that program should not have come when it did come. Okay, that I think should have done it like in the second semester.” At West High School Eliza lamented, “we didn't have a lot of time to learn the material before we were

teaching the material with the Teacher wrap did help that part, but more time with the content before we rolled it out." Again at West High School, Eva said:

> …it was really rushed. And it was like, Okay, we have to have you guys do this. And it, okay. Why? Because we have to change what we're doing. Okay. But I think all three of us have the expectation that because we're going to, we're going to do it, the kids are going to do it and do it. Well. Huh, anyways, but it was just rushed in the beginning… Oh, to do all of this right now and get my own and learn this curriculum and do that. So I was very much crazy for that little bit of time.

Freddy followed up by saying:

> if this had been delivered to us, maybe at Christmas, and said, Hey, we're gonna roll this out in the fall. Here it is right, and then had time to kind of digest it and understand it, pick it apart as we do. I think that would have been much more manageable. Yeah.

These sentiments aligned with this response from the questionnaire, "It would have been beneficial to have more time on the front-end to prepare and acquaint myself better with the curriculum."

Time was also seen as a resource. Once they became more comfortable and familiar with the curriculum, teachers perceived that it gave them time back in their day. The resources alleviated some of the tedious work of planning lessons, finding aligned resources, and then packaging them together into a deliverable for their classes. Lisa said, "we talked about needing time, and I think there are certain resources built into this, that help us save time. And time is precious." First-year teacher Daniel said, "I see all this stuff that's already done on the platform. I can just sit there say assign and I have got a 20-question test on the whole unit already done."

A common frustration was with the digital side of the platform. Riverbank School District is a one-to-one technology district with every student having a device. When the curriculum was selected, one of the considerations was how well it worked on the digital devices and the ease of the digital platform use for the teacher. For this curriculum implementation, the digital platform was a frustration point. It did not integrate seamlessly with the district's student learning management system. Teachers were not comfortable with how to make assignments on the platform so most of them used the print materials only. At West High School, several teachers voiced their frustration with the digital pieces of the curriculum. Eva explained:

> Part of my frustration is not being able to use the curriculum online because the kids aren't charging their devices, can't remember some passwords, having to… it's just too much. So like all the things that we want to use the books that the supplemental stuff is pointless.

Eva went on to say:

> I did experiment with it. When I had my guinea pig group. And I said, we're gonna try it online, see how it goes. So they did a couple activities online. And I was like, Nope, this is too much for me." Freddy said that the interface is "really hard to operate.

From Central High School, Olivia said, "we were promised in integration with the LMS. That has not happened. And that that has been a little frustrating too." Daniel tried the digital platform early on and had this to say:

> When I was trying to navigate and teach off the iPad, I was even getting confused with some things were, were not matching what the book says. So, they had like, last fall, I just did strictly out of the book, nothing else.

At the Early College, Georgia said, “I never could figure out how to get the curriculum and the LMS.” She shrugged and continued, “Yeah, some of those things worked really nicely together and some of them just don't.” From East High School, “I really have not used the LMS for much at all, which makes it tough whenever kids are out.” For context, the district’s expectation is that teachers keep their LMS updated so that students have access to the class at all times.

There were some frustration points around rigor and alignment of the curriculum to the NCSCOS as well. For rigor, a new teacher said it was a big shift without much scaffolding support:

> It's a huge escalation and like the book doesn't really provide adequate support for that. So it makes it much harder than I think it needs to be. I like the idea the spirit of the additional writing, but in practice, I wish like the curriculum had like writing workshops and kind of elements where it would actually help build up those writing skills rather than just, hey, you've answered a bunch of questions. Now you're going to drop right into an argumentative essay. It's a fairly big shift.

As an aside, the curriculum does have a writing workshop component but that resource was not emphasized during this implementation. Todd expounded the rigor demands of the curriculum:

> The perception of my kids first semester, like, very quickly, they're not gonna like this textbook, like why are we doing this? All this poetry? This is terrible, like, and then second semester and these kids who have already they've heard about it, or they've used it, they were a little more receptive to it and having done a lot, right, like it's, as we know more, we get more receptive to it as well.

Liam was concerned about the scaffolding as well:

> Sixteen-year-olds yeah, really not so much so that you kind of have to really, spoon feed them all of that. And then it's just, and then by that point, like, this has taken so much time for you to get right. What is like, I'm not even sure it really what the point of having to do all that is."

Overall, the resources were helpful to the teachers and to the principals. They provided a common platform for all classrooms and teachers had high-quality resources to use. The teachers felt their best resource was each other. The growth of the professional learning community across the district helped push the implementation forward. As teachers from the various schools worked together on pacing, lesson structure, data analysis, and assessments, they grew more comfortable reaching out to each other as they had questions or needed assistance.

A common frustration point was the fast implementation in the fall. Teachers would have appreciated a longer timeline to acquaint themselves with the materials. They were also very frustrated with the poor LMS integration and struggled with the digital platform. The professional development was centered around using the core curriculum and little time was devoted to the online platform. Teachers who taught English II were frustrated because they felt the alignment to the NCSCOS was not there. They were concerned with test preparation so that students would do well on the End of Course assessment.

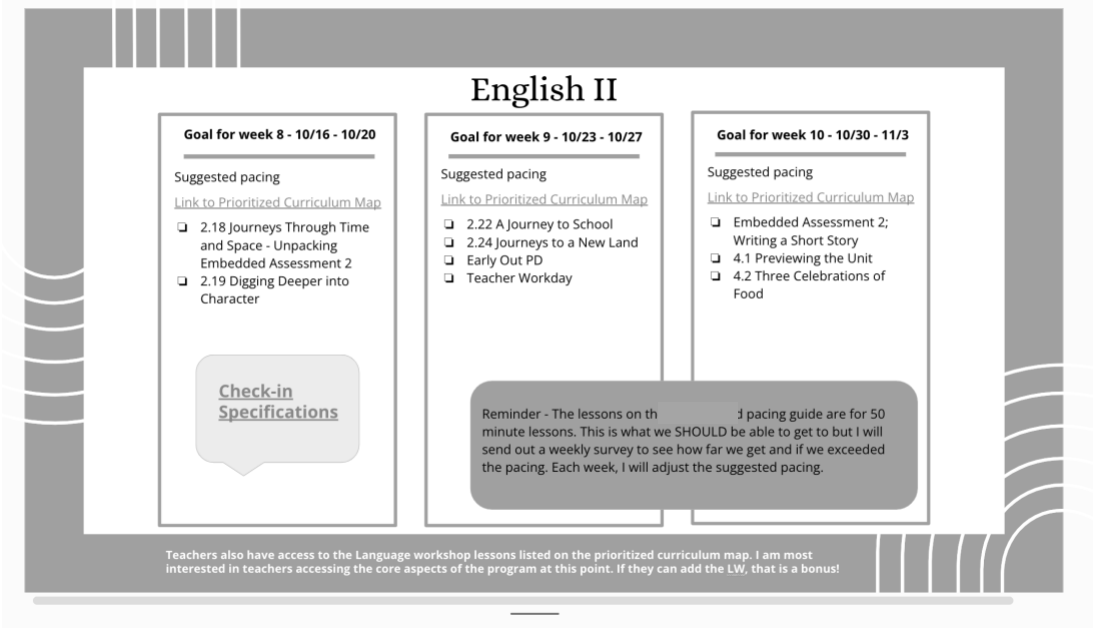
**Summary**

I had the rare opportunity to go through this implementation with the teachers from the selection process through the end of the year one implementation. I do not serve in an evaluative capacity, and I have known most of the teachers for seven years or more. The teachers were open and honest with me during the curriculum selection process. They were concerned about the rigor of the curriculum before it was selected but ultimately, it was the strong writing component

that drove the selection. At the beginning of the year, it was chaotic with the materials arriving late and teachers training before they had student books. As the team journeyed through the first semester, voiced frustration and concern with the lesson pacing. I adjusted the pacing along the way to allow for the concerns.

The newsletters were helpful to most of the teachers and all of the principals but they made some teachers anxious. Teachers from East High School felt they were constantly having to catch up to the pacing. They described themselves as "rule followers" who wanted to meet expectations but were concerned that their students were not ready to move on. Other teachers fell behind as they added in tried-and-true lessons they had used in their classrooms previously. The majority said the newsletter, found in Figure 4.2, helped keep them on track as they worked through the curriculum.

**Figure 4.2 -** *Sample from the High School Highlights newsletter*




The survey, interviews, focus groups, and historical document reviews provided me with insights into district leader, principal, and teacher perceptions of the process that I would not

have been able to collect informally or anecdotally. The case study method was an appropriate vehicle for collecting perception information as it provided structure for collecting multiple data points and direct information from the participants. My understanding of the multi-layered feelings around curriculum implementation has been increased through this case study.

# CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to study high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders' perceptions of a high school English Language Arts curriculum implementation process. Using the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model as the theoretical framework for defining the curriculum implementation process, I sought to understand how teachers perceived their experience as defined by the six components of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model. The curriculum implementation occurred in the 2023-24 school year. The school year consisted of two separate semesters, fall and spring. Each English Language Arts class is completed within a semester, block scheduling, unless the course is on an A/B day year-long schedule as was the case in one high school. This study occurred in the spring semester of the 2023-24 school year.

Over the course of the semester, teachers were administered a questionnaire containing both Likert scale and open-ended questions. Teachers, principals, and district leaders participated in focus groups using open-ended versions of the Likert scale questions and the open-ended questions from the questionnaire found in Appendices B and E. Teachers who were not available for the scheduled focus groups were invited to participate in individual interviews using the same protocol as the focus group. Interviews included teachers from traditional high schools as well as those from the alternative school and the Early College.

The data from the questionnaire, focus groups, and interviews provided information used to address each of the three research questions within the framework of the study:

1. How do high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district?

2. What are the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?
3. What strategies could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders?

**Summary of Findings**

The focus group and interview protocol questions were aligned with the research questions. Responses from the survey, focus groups, and the interviews were coded using an In Vivo and a deductive coding scheme. The coverage from the coding is shown in Tables 4.8 and 4.9.

The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was the theoretical framework used to define this case study. The Change Model consists of six components necessary for change to be successful – vision, consensus, skills, incentives, resources, and action plan (Knoster et al., 2000). If any of these components are missing, the result could be confusion, sabotage, anxiety, resistance, frustration, and false starts. The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was a robust model to use in the framing of this study. Although a strong model, I believe the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model is missing the specific element of staff collaboration. Collaboration is distinctly different from consensus. In consensus, the group reaches an agreeable decision. Collaboration gives the opportunity for a group to wrestle with a task together increasing the social aspect of the task and the investment in the task (Park Rogers et al., 2021). A focus on collaboration is a focus on the people who are doing the work.

John Kotter posits that change fails when the initiative relies too heavily on reason and structure. Although these elements are crucial to change, change agents must consider the human participants' feelings and beliefs. Bringing about change requires an understanding of the

human, political and symbolic elements of an organization (Bolman et al., 2006). Kotter believes that leaders must consider what changes are necessary. Leaders must build a case for the change, engage employees to accelerate results, and reinforce and sustain the momentum until the change is successful (Kotter et al., 2021).

This study examined the perceptions of a curriculum implementation in a district that is challenged by its status as a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. This district is also a tight-knit community with a core of experienced district and school leaders. Traditional high schools in this district were mid-size with student populations between 700 – 1,00 students. The student body is diverse with multiple races and multiple academic designations such as gifted, multilingual, and exceptional children. Although this study did not include student perceptions, it is important to note teachers in this district are responsible for teaching multiple levels of English such as English I, II, III, and IV. They also teach a mix of standard level, honors level, exceptional children inclusion, and Advanced Placement classes. All these elements provided a foundation for diversity of thought and experience that lent itself to a rich case study experience.

### *Research Question 1*

Research question one asked how high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders experience the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. The teachers and principals who participated in the study were situated in the high school grade span. District leaders consisted of the Elementary Grades Director, Middle Grades Director, Academically/Intellectually Gifted and Digital Learning Director, and the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. I am the High

School/Career and Technical Education Director and served as the primary researcher for this study.

District leadership was included because all three grade spans implemented English Language Arts curriculum in the same school year. The district team worked together to create the action plan for adopting a curriculum, guide the curriculum selection process, secure the materials, roll out the implementation plan, and support the implementation throughout the school year. Their work set the tone for the implementation throughout the district and as such, they provided a comprehensive overview of the process. In addition, district leadership is privy to funding information as well as the overarching initial vision for the curriculum implementation.

The district leadership team spoke at great length about the vision for the curriculum implementation. The district team discussed the need for a rigorous curriculum that would ensure that all children received standards-aligned, on-grade-level instruction. Principals and teachers echoed the need for rigor, although they cited poor student achievement on the End of Course (EOC) English II state assessment as one of the primary drivers of the implementation. At the time of the data collection, the students had not been assessed on or EOC measures. Reform movement stresses the importance of rigor and higher order thinking in producing optimal student outcomes (Fulmer & Turner, 2014). Even without the EOC results on hand, teachers in each focus group noted the rigor of the curriculum had increased the quality of student discussions in the classroom and student work. District leadership noted this as well, saying many teachers had not bought into the curriculum at first because it was “too hard for the kids,” but as time went on, teachers saw that students were successful at more rigorous levels of instruction.

Principals, teachers, and district leadership indicated there was a lack of alignment between school buildings and classrooms across the district before the curriculum implementation. This aligns with the research indicating schools are loose organizations with variable adherence to policies and procedures (Cooper et al., 2004). The curriculum adoption intent was to put a high quality, aligned resource in every classroom which would provide a common foundation for all classroom instruction. Teacher-selected resources and equity of resources has been outcome oriented and traditionally measured by high stakes, standardized test scores (Chu, 2019). Despite not having the cumulative test results, the district leaders believed the implementation was successful because they had seen evidence of more engaging instruction during classroom visits and positive trends on formative assessments.

During the focus group conversation, principals also focused heavily on equity of resources and student assessment results. The principals agreed a common curriculum was needed and that classroom instruction across the district needed to be similar. They discussed the wide variety of resources that had been used across the district and, as a result, the misalignment of instruction from classroom to classroom. Even with high quality curriculum, implementation differences can lead to wide gaps in instructional quality (Boston & Wilhelm, 2015). The principals noted younger or earlier career teachers adopted the new curriculum more quickly than the veteran teachers. Some felt this was the case because newer teachers did not have as many resources upon which to draw. Since they had not been teaching very long, beginning teachers were more willing to try new things. Teachers indicated the same, with early career teachers stating that they were thankful to have a resource to draw from when planning lessons. A teacher in each focus group talked about freeing up mental space and being able to focus on

how to instruct rather than on what to instruct. This is significant as a lack of time was identified as a stressor for educators (Larson et al., 2018).

The principals and the teachers appreciated being included in the curriculum selection process. Principals said it opened the door to discuss instruction and standards alignment. Since they had seen the resources from the vendors before teacher leaders were brought into the discussion, they felt more confident during the selection process. Teacher leaders appreciated being able to view the curriculum with their district peers. A barrier to implementations is a lack of consensus which manifests in confusion or fear (Knoster et al., 2000). Teachers who were not included in the district level process felt excluded and on the fringes of the decision making as evidenced in the Early College teacher interview and the West High School focus group. Freddy shed light on this perception saying:

> I would have liked a little more insight into how we arrived at this particular curriculum. I think that it would have been interesting to be in on those discussions… I do encounter things that I would not typically teach English II course, in a typical year. So I'm kind of curious, okay, what is the pedagogical reasoning behind having this here instead of having it in a different level, where it normally in my mind, at least would be? So, I think that would have been interesting to be kind of privy to those conversations.

Overall, participants experienced stress throughout the implementation process. Principals reported that they had to fight negativity and "naysayers" in their buildings. One principal remarked the teachers kept pressing her to say "don't worry about it" when they expressed their concerns about the curriculum. Throughout the year, teachers asked their principals if the district was indeed going to keep the curriculum in the next school year. All principals reported or agreed they spent considerable time listening to the concerns, but they

used the district's action plan and vision to reiterate the need to press forward with the implementation. Teachers who feel high levels of support from their principals are more likely to implement programs with fidelity (Clayback et al., 2022). The principals said most of their naysayers came around.

Principals felt the teachers wanted to be heard and to have the opportunity for a discussion about their concerns. This aligned with the responses on the historical surveys from the first semester, teacher interviews, and teacher focus groups. Teachers answered the district's pacing surveys during the first semester and provided comments each week. They used the district professional learning communities (PLC) meetings as a forum to discuss the curriculum and the implementation during the professional development days. Margaret, one of the veteran teachers, described the implementation process as "horrific." During her focus group, she said the pacing expectations and the weekly reminders were stressful. She went on to say she knew she needed to spend more time developing skills and preparing students for the high stakes testing at the end of the semester. The action plan for implementation includes a balance of examining the past, the present, and thinking about the future while keeping an open mind to new possibilities (Lippitt, 2021). I used Margaret's feedback to help design the post-school year work session that was held in June. Margaret is a teacher leader and was included in the planning process for the June work session.

In addition to the district-level PLC meetings, the principals held more frequent school-level PLC meetings. The principals were the drivers of the implementation in their school buildings. Most principals reported spending a good portion of those meetings listening to the teachers. This discourse led to principals feeling vulnerable, but increased their partnership with their teachers. Curriculum implementations, like many other challenges in education provide

opportunities to build genuine and strong connections between teachers and leaders. Open discourse provides opportunity for professional growth at every level (Lang, 2018). Patti, a veteran principal who is fairly new to her school said that she enjoyed listening to their discussions and thoughts about the curriculum and the process. She felt the discussions in the PLCs led to greater implementation because the teachers were competitive about their instruction. Patti viewed this competitiveness as a positive force that helped move the implementation forward.

Teachers viewed the PLC meetings at the district and the school level as an incentive throughout the curriculum implementation. They reported enjoying the new connections they made with teachers across the district. These connections were especially important to teachers who were the only teachers of that level in their school building. For example, the English teacher at the alternative school is the only high school English teacher in her building. She built connections with other teachers and felt more comfortable reaching out to them and asking her questions. When teachers interact with each other over time, the social context of the interactions influences the ways in which teachers make sense of a practice and how they change their practice (Spillane et al., 2002). Teacher communities are a vital part of the implementation process (Bryk et al., 2017). Teachers used the PLC meetings to make sense of the curriculum and exchange ideas throughout the implementation process.

Two of the most veteran teachers, from separate schools, stated they needed to make modifications to the curriculum to make it more aligned with the End of Course testing. Most curriculum products are national products and are not aligned to specific state standards (Pak et al., 2020). Leah, another veteran principal who is still fairly new to her school said:

…no curriculum is going to be 100% everything wonderful. It's not going to do everything, but it certainly should be that 90%. You're not having it flipped where it's 80-90% pulling in all sorts of things and the curriculum is 10%, it should be the other way around.

The principals liked having the district pacing in an easy to access format which was the high school newsletter. They agreed that having that district-created resource gave them a guide to use with the teachers throughout the process. The teachers were uncertain and anxious in the beginning but as the school year progressed, they felt more confident in their abilities to navigate the curriculum. District leaders, principals, and teachers all expressed the actual implementation has been successful, even though it was difficult and stressful for several reasons.

***Research Question 2***

Research question two addressed the perceived barriers to curriculum implementation from the perspective of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders. Managing change within an organization is challenging and barriers to change implementation are plentiful. Even with a strong action plan that lays out the processes and procedures step by step, implementation does not always proceed as planned. Over time, if the organization persists with the plan and makes adjustments along the way to account for unexpected pitfalls, the change can occur (Burke, 2014, Chapter 16). In the case of this curriculum implementation, the change was communicated, and the steps of the action plan were followed but barriers still presented themselves.

The first barrier was the question of curriculum selection. The district leadership team, along with the principals and teacher leaders were tasked with evaluating curriculum. They had not had access to a formal curriculum in over fifteen years. Teachers reported having had almost complete control and autonomy over their classroom and instructional materials. Implementing a

structured, formalized curriculum was a hard shift from what had been the norm in the district. Educators are reluctant to implement policies or programs that do not align with their own interests including implementation efforts that jeopardize their autonomy (Spillane et al., 2002). Teachers and principals alike mentioned the loss of autonomy and flexibility. District and school leadership leveraged poor student achievement results to push through this barrier by demonstrating a data supported case for change.

The second barrier was the question of funding. In low-wealth districts, funding for textbooks is scarce and local funds are earmarked for other items that cannot be obtained with federal or state funding, leaving little for big curriculum purchases. Additionally, the purchase had to be approved by the school board. The process for approval was lengthy and the timeline pushed to the end of the summer. A shortened timeline left a few weeks to obtain the materials and to make big adjustments to locally created pacing documents and assessments. Time was a resource mentioned by all groups in the study. When teachers feel they have limited time, they experience increased stress and work overload (Larson et al., 2018). The compressed implementation timeline caused stress and negativity at the onset, as study participants voiced not having adequate time to prepare to implement the curriculum.

Rigor was a barrier that was expressed in the district's historical surveys from the first semester. In the historical surveys, Eliza and Eva, both mid-career teachers, said that this curriculum was more appropriate for honors level students. During the focus group, both said that the students rose to the occasion, and were able to be successful with the curriculum. Teachers across all focus groups and in some of the interviews noted the students had "gaps" in their learning that had to be scaffolded and supported in order for students to access the curriculum. Rigor concerns are sometimes present in curriculum implementations (Pak et al.,

2020). It is important to find the root cause of rigor concerns so they can be addressed. Teachers in this study anticipate rigor will be less of a problem moving forward, since students will have had prior exposure to the types of questioning and the writing expectations in the curriculum. Overcoming barriers to implementation will be addressed in the findings from research question three.

### *Research Question 3*

Research question three explored strategies that could reduce the stress or difficulty of curriculum implementation for high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders. This research question required the three target groups to identify areas of stress, and how that could have been alleviated. The Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was the theoretical framework for the study. The components of the model are easy to understand, although less easy to implement. In the coding process, the overlay between the components of the Lippitt-Knoster model and the outcomes was evident. Kotter suggests a change strategy should rely less on data gathering, analysis, report writing and presentations. It should rely more on the human component focusing on feelings and motivations (Bolman et al., 2006). Research questions one and three focused on feelings and perceptions. Research question three was asked with the purpose of identifying outcomes for future implementation projects.

Time was the most requested resource in the focus groups, interviews, questionnaire responses, and the historical documents. Time is a precious commodity in a school building, where fixed schedules and extra duties are the norm (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). In low-wealth districts, teachers are often asked to take on extra duties such as coaching or filling in for vacant classrooms. Another identified issue was supporting classrooms with long-term substitutes. Teachers were asked to provide lessons and plans for vacant classrooms staffed by long-term

substitute teachers. These extra duties contribute to a lack of time. Adding a curriculum implementation on top of this was stressful. The compressed timeline between the approval for the curriculum and the curriculum shipment added to the difficulties. Teachers were not able to study the resources ahead of time and were learning the curriculum as the semester launched.

District leaders, teachers, and principals made time to meet in PLCs, which allowed for some common planning and discussion. These meetings seemed to help with the time factor. Many teachers remarked they leaned on others in the teaching community for lessons, suggestions, and some even shared their entire learning management courses with other teachers. Teachers also remarked the curriculum gave them some time back since the foundation and the structure for the lessons was provided in the resources.

For teachers in non-traditional settings such as the Early College and the Alternative School, communication and building a teacher community were more difficult. For the Early College, communication during the selection process was lacking. They were surprised with the new curriculum in the fall semester. They had already started school when the curriculum arrived, and their schedule did not allow for attendance at the district professional development or the PLC meetings. It is important for leaders to not only communicate well but to also understand timing of effective communication (Burke, 2014, Chapter 16). Better communication before the curriculum adoption would have helped them prepare for a curriculum implementation. In hindsight, the district should have held a meeting with them prior to the start of their school year so they would have been included in the onboarding process.

In the Alternative School, there is only one teacher per subject and there is less of a sense of belonging to a teacher community. The Alternative School English teacher was included in the curriculum selection process as well as on the leadership team. She said the best part of the

implementation process was the opportunity to connect with her peers. She never believed she had access to her peers prior to the implementation. Teacher collaboration gives teachers an opportunity to share and access new ideas and is an incentive for increasing instructional capacity (Spillane et al., 2002).

Teacher community was a common thread among the focus groups and the interviews. Teachers, district leaders, and principals felt the PLC meetings led to increased buy-in of the curriculum because they could discuss the curriculum and its use in their classrooms. Teachers explored different aspects of the curriculum and brought that knowledge back to their peers. Beyond the PLC meetings, teachers collaborated with each other to share resources, lesson plans, and ideas. The unstructured nature of the teacher community provided the social aspect of the implementation process and led to feelings of professional growth across the district.

The onboarding process was critical to the implementation. With large book shipments looming, district leadership knew it was imperative to provide high-quality professional development that would give the teachers a foundation for using the new curriculum. The district contracted the curriculum company to provide two full days of professional development during the opening week of workdays. Many teachers felt the professional development was helpful. There was overlap with teachers who were against the curriculum and who felt the professional development was not effective. Another teacher had access to the curriculum in a previous district but had not fully implemented it. She stated the professional development in Riverbank District gave her more confidence in using the curriculum and she fully implemented it in her classroom throughout the year. Positive teacher perception of the usefulness of the professional development increases their commitment to adopting the curriculum (Penuel et al., 2007).

The mid-year professional development was not as well-received as the opening professional development. The district contracted with the curriculum company to provide a follow-up training prior to the beginning of the second semester. The training was considered ineffective for numerous reasons. The teachers did not connect with the trainer. They wanted different information than what she was providing. The trainer continued with the training outline the company provided. At this point, the teachers wanted to better understand the digital aspects of the program, but the training was not geared towards that. The teachers were disappointed that the learning management system integration was difficult to navigate. Neither the district nor the company had satisfactory answers to address their concerns.

What the teachers really wanted at the semester break training was to be able to work in their teacher community to plan the second semester. Professional development inclusive of teacher collaboration is viewed more favorably than sessions that are not as collaborative (Penuel et al., 2007). The English teachers had been through the curriculum map in the first semester, and wanted to adjust pacing and selections for the second semester in their teacher community groups, based on their experiences. In hindsight, that is what should have been done at the semester break training. Teachers need to believe that professional development is relevant and timely, otherwise, they will see it as a drain on their time, which is a highly valued resource (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). Based on teacher feedback, the next district PLC was conducted as a full planning session.

Staff onboarding emerged as an area of discussion. Teachers, principals, and district leaders who had been involved in the process from the curriculum selection process felt the implementation had been smooth, but the late arrival of the resources made the initial implementation difficult. Staff members who had not been involved found the implementation

process to be abrupt and wanted more time to learn the curriculum before being expected to teach from it. Teachers who came after the school year started were at the biggest disadvantage.

There were three teachers who started after the school year began. These teachers were expected to jump into the curriculum along with everyone else. Unfortunately, the other teachers in the building were learning the curriculum as well. Because of this, it was challenging to support their new peers. Teachers, even highly skilled teachers, feel more comfortable with new curriculum after they have had a full cycle of implementation (McCoy et al., 2019). Onboarding plans for late-start teachers could have helped alleviate some of the stress for these new teachers and their mentors.

Long-term substitutes needed to be addressed as well. In a climate where it is difficult to find and retain highly qualified teachers, especially in rural, low-wealth and low-performing schools, contingency plans must be made for long-term substitutes lest the opportunity for access to high quality curriculum be diminished by the lack of highly qualified teachers (Boston & Wilhelm, 2015). Lead teachers and district leadership needed to work together to provide a comprehensive plan of support for these classrooms, as well as the teachers tasked with providing lessons and resources.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to study high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders' perceptions of a high school English Language Arts curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing district. The findings of this research suggest that using the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model as a framework for curriculum implementation is a powerful way to organize a curriculum implementation. Using the model to organize the data, it was evident each component is

necessary to facilitate the implementation in a way that increases staff buy-in and promotes the fidelity of implementation.

It was imperative that the district had a clear vision for a curriculum implementation including the vision, the intended outcomes, and the overall strategies to achieve the outcomes. Building consensus among every level of staff member from the district office to the classroom increased buy-in and strengthened the community as they engaged in a stressful and challenging process. Professional development, professional learning communities, and real time training all contributed to an increase of skills and greater understanding of the curriculum resources. Human resources are both incentives and resources. The teachers relied on district leaders and principals for guidance and the execution of the action plan, but they relied on each other for professional support and growth.

The action plan was essential for curriculum implementation. It provided a framework for implementation, a timeline, assessment points, and steps for attaining the intended outcomes. The action plan should also be flexible enough to allow for adjustments as the plan is executed. Leaders must be responsive to the needs of staff members while still pressing the implementation process. Leaders balance past knowledge with present happenings and lead with an eye towards the future as they commit to keeping an open mind throughout the process (Lippitt, 2021). Many of the concerns or barriers were identified in the literature (Bryk et al., 2017; Schueler & West, 2021; Viano et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016). Garnering input from participants along the way provided insight into how the implementation was progressing and what adjustments needed to be made.

As a district leader, the findings of this research provided an understanding of participants' perceptions of the curriculum implementation process and offered several

suggestions for future curriculum implementation work. High quality curriculum aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study is a valuable resource to school districts such as Riverbank. Commercially-produced curriculum is expensive, but it is an investment in both the students and the teachers. As such, it is imperative that we respect the investment of human and fiscal resources entrusted to a district.

An implication of the study is to identify a framework for curriculum implementation and organize the work around it. Many frameworks for organizational change exist in both educational and business contexts (Bolman et al., 2006; Boudett et al., 2013; Bryk et al., 2017; Burke, 2014, Chapter 16; Knoster et al., 2000; Kotter et al., 2021). Leaders should examine multiple frameworks and select those that can be used or adapted to fit their context, drawing from the best set of practices. I found the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model to be a good fit for this curriculum implementation but, as I continued my case study research, other frameworks emerged that would have been equally appropriate.

During this study, the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model was not used as the specific framework to plan the curriculum implementation. It was used as a framework for providing context for the study. Because of this study, in my work as a district leader, I found myself thinking in terms of the Lippitt-Knoster Change model while working on the actual curriculum implementation itself. I found that the model began to emerge in my work on the actual curriculum implementation once the first semester had begun. Using the model to plan the implementation from the curriculum selection and throughout would have been helpful during all stages of the curriculum implementation process.

Another implication of the study is the need to focus on building teacher communities to support curriculum implementation. Leveraging human resources in a strategic way will further

the organization's goals. Prior to the study, all schools had semi-regularly meeting PLCs in place. The district held district-wide PLCs several times during the school year in addition to curriculum guide work sessions during the summer months. Throughout this curriculum implementation, the frequency of district- and school-level PLCs increased. With a shared focus on this resource, the discussions in the PLCs became more meaningful and the teachers looked forward to their time together. The inclusivity of the group led to richer discussions and many teachers noted working in such a way with other teachers enhanced their professional growth. The teacher community that developed throughout this process seemed to transcend the traditional PLC, becoming more than just a discussion of data, pacing, and lesson development. It became a social-emotional support system that built consensus and a complex network of teachers who saw each other as their greatest resource.

District and school leaders are often worried about taking up teachers' time, as time is one of a teacher's most valuable resources. I maintain that a well-functioning teacher community is worth the investment of time. In the long run, teachers who feel supported and part of a community are more productive and less stressed by the demands of the job (Larson et al., 2018). They are enjoying collective efficacy as part of a team, which in turn builds confidence among the staff (Boudett et al., 2013). In this case study, district leadership had two narrow focus areas: student assessment data and implementing the new curriculum. Using these focus areas as the starting point initiated rich conversations about English Language Arts standards, classroom instruction, impromptu teacher-led professional development, and the sharing of resources. Development of schedules that allow for teacher exploration furthered the vision and the fidelity of the implementation.

The need to define the role of professional development throughout the implementation process is another implication of this study. I am including onboarding processes with professional development in this implication. Research has shown that for professional development to be meaningful, it has to be relatable to the participants' context, provided at the appropriate time, and be of high quality (Albright et al., 2013; Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Yu et al., 2021). At the onset of the implementation, district leadership decided that it was imperative we set aside funds to secure professional training staff from the curriculum company. District leadership felt there was no better person to introduce teachers to the curriculum than the organization fully invested in its creation and rollout. In addition, the company provided mini training sessions throughout the curriculum selection process by modeling lessons and demonstrating use of the resources.

Although district leaders found the professional trainers to be well versed in the curriculum, not all of them were flexible enough to respond to teacher questions or concerns in the moment. Teacher perceptions of the training varied based on the quality of the trainer. For example, the initial training for the high school teachers was well received. The trainer was a practicing high school teacher who not only showed the resources but discussed how he used them in his classroom. The January training was not as well received. The trainer was inflexible and was not interested in deviating from the training script. The teachers found her to be less engaging and complained about the training to me during breaks. Had the trainer taken the time to address a few of their questions that were off-script, she would have had a more welcome reception and the teachers would have felt their time had not been wasted. While district leaders do not have control over the vendor's selections for trainers, they can be very targeted in their specifications for the professional development session making PD more relevant to the teachers.

When considering professional development, district leaders should develop multiple strands. The primary strand is for schools that operate on a traditional school year calendar. This professional development is for teachers who come in at the beginning of the school year and are able to attend the beginning-of-year professional development sessions. The next strand is for alternative calendar staff. This is the case for schools that operate on a different calendar from the main calendar of the school system. Developing a strand for alternative calendars provides those staff members the opportunity to benefit from professional development sessions and have the same level of input as their traditional calendar peers. The third strand is for teachers who start work after the school year has begun. In the case of these staff members, the district needs to provide "quick start" guides and videos that will help them learn the curriculum through a "just in time" model. Professional development should meet the skill level of the teachers to be most relevant (Knoster et al., 2000). This strand can only be effective if school and district leaders are in constant communication with principals as positions are filled.

Teachers are not the only staff who need professional development. District leaders must build relationships with the vendors so that support can be continuous, and they can take any questions back to the company. Attendance at teacher professional development sessions is a necessary part of the process. I found my attendance at teacher PD sessions helped address questions and concerns before they became larger issues. Because I heard the questions in real time, I was able to research answers and build trust with the teachers. Principals, Assistant Principals, and Curriculum Specialists need training as well. They are the front line of implementation support in a school. The principals in this study expressed they would have liked to have more training so they would have been more familiar with the curriculum.

Communication is key in any change process (Bolman et al., 2006; Boudett et al., 2013; Lippitt, 2021; Porter et al., 2014). Curriculum implementation cannot occur in silos. There must be open lines of communication between teachers and district leadership, district leadership and principals, and principals and teachers (Bryk et al., 2017). This cannot occur without trust. An element of the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model is consensus. I built consensus by keeping the lines of communication open from the first vendor visit throughout the implementation process. All the surveys, PLC meetings, professional development sessions, and individual conversations provided opportunities for open lines of communication. Curriculum implementation was discussed in every grade level principal's meeting. All teachers were encouraged to call or email me directly with any questions. I often visited schools or reached out to the building level department chairs when I had questions or concerns as well. I felt vulnerable in the process as did the principals but, because communication lines were open, we were able to address the issues that arose.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

There were limitations with this study. Much like the teachers, I would have enjoyed a longer timeline to collect data, to conduct interviews, and lead focus groups. It was important to capture the data on the timeline I proposed. Teachers had implemented the curriculum for one semester when I began the data collection process. In Riverbank School District, high schools operate on a block schedule with the exception of one year-long A/B day class. This means the teachers taught the entire course in one semester. By collecting the data in the second semester, they had been through one full teaching cycle.

Another limitation was my dependence on the participants to be honest and open. My role as the High School Career and Technical Education Director is non-evaluative. I am

considered a peer of the principals, and I do not supervise them. I have served in this district for over twenty years and have known many of the participants for almost that long. I believe the development of relational trust I have built over many years freed the participants to be honest and open. This is evidenced in their responses to the questions as they provided both positive and negative feedback. It was important to me to gather all aspects of the input both positive and negative. By listening to it all, I can refine and improve my practice as a leader.

Functioning in the dual role of implementer and researcher was immersive. The research did inform my practices throughout the study. As discussed earlier, the change model was not used in the planning process for the curriculum implementation. As I learned more through the research, I found myself leaning on the change model to contextualize my work as a leader. I have worked with many of the study participants for the majority of my career and they were very open and genuine with me which empowered the newer staff to be open as well. I practiced self-reflection throughout the study to ensure that I was open and receptive to their feedback and needs in return. Finding the balance in the role of implementer and researcher was challenging but manageable.

There were delimitations to the study as well. I limited the study to one school district. Since it was my own district, I was aware of the timeline and the historical information that would aid in my understanding of the research questions. I had access to historical documents, the approval of the superintendent to conduct the study, and I was immersed in the work.

I only studied the high school implementation although the district implemented English and math curriculum across the K-12 grade span. Studying all three grade spans would have made the study too broad and unmanageable for one researcher. I wanted the context of the other grade span directors and found that we experienced the implementations in similar ways. We

also provided each other support and sharing of resources throughout the process of implementation.

Although I was involved in the high school English and math implementations, I only studied the English implementation. Again, studying both would have made the study too broad and unmanageable for a single researcher. Case studies are built around immersion with the participants. The interview and focus group process would have been challenging to complete with both curriculum areas. Additionally, the curriculum selected for English and math did not come from the same vendor, which meant the professional development and resources were very different from each other.

**Recommendations**

In this section, I will share recommendations for policy and future research. I grew as a leader through this process. The findings from this study have changed the way I function as a leader and will inform my future projects. I have spent time as a teacher, school counselor, assistant principal, and principal. I leaned on all those experiences as I worked through this curriculum implementation. Listening to the feedback from the participants allowed me to expand my thinking and provided me with keen insight into how the process felt for them.

As a former counselor, I want to be empathetic. As a former teacher, I never want to forget what it felt like to lead a classroom or as a principal to supervise a staff of teachers and treat them as professionals. As a leader, I found myself using both empathy and being a warm demander. Warm demanders are empathetic but still communicate high expectations (Moon et al., 2023). The data collection methods in this study allowed me to listen empathetically while standing firm on the vision of the curriculum implementation. After all, the goal was to ensure

that all students, regardless of school or instructor, had access to a rigorous curriculum that would prepare them for their postsecondary future.

### *Policy Recommendations*

The results of this study support current research that recognizes the barriers and challenges to curriculum implementation. Implications for policy lie in the reason for curriculum implementation at the onset. In a district that has limited funding for expensive curriculum purchases, it is imperative that high-quality curriculum is selected. Although the overall student achievement data are low, gaps exist between the proficiency and growth of subgroups. Providing the secure foundation of a research-based, standards-aligned curriculum that is implemented with fidelity lends equity to the instruction of all children and can help eliminate achievement gaps (Ansorger, 2021; Boston & Wilhelm, 2017; TNTP, 2022). Core curriculum purchases can be considered unattainable in low-wealth districts (Saatcioglu et al., 2020). The overwhelming cost of such curricula is a deterrent to districts who wish to invest in a foundational core. Equitable funding policies for districts who struggle to provide funds outside of state and federal funding streams would ease the burden of deciding between curriculum purchases, teacher supplements, and the issue of aging facilities.

High stakes testing policies can be drivers of curriculum implementation. In North Carolina, school performance grades, principal bonuses, and performance designations are tied directly to student performance and growth as measured by state high stakes End of Grade or End of Course testing. In a high school, other measures factor into the school performance grades such as graduation rate, math course rigor, and ACT and ACT WorkKeys performance. Student growth is measured using the English II EOC assessment and the NC Math 1 or NC Math 3 EOC assessment depending on a student's math pathway. National curriculum products

are not fully aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Therefore, the local level needs to make adjustments in order to align curriculum to what is being assessed (Saatcioglu et al., 2020). Since North Carolina creates its own assessments, determines the performance level cut scores, and how growth is measured it would be a benefit to districts if the specifications for these measures was explicitly clear. Schools receive domain performance measures and subgroup performance data, but these reports lack the depth and breadth of national assessment reports such as the ACT or Advanced Placement exam reports. Districts would benefit from a more detailed student performance report, as this would provide a better data source when aligning curriculum resources and pacing guides to state assessments.

### *Future Research*

The findings from this study will impact my district and my work beyond the scope of this implementation. As noted in Chapter 2, rural schools are understudied, and high schools are an even smaller segment of that research. I recommend the study be conducted in other rural settings to expand the knowledge base around curriculum implementation and rural educational opportunity. Some of the research noted educational outcomes differences between the rural South and rural Midwest or rural Northeast (Drescher et al., 2022).

An unexplored area of my study was student perception of the curriculum implementation. The curriculum was selected and implemented because it was rigorous, suggested multiple instructional strategies for teachers, provided differentiation opportunities, and had an emphasis on writing instruction. Extending this research to student perceptions would give insight into how students felt during the curriculum implementation. Student perceptions about changes in teaching style, the literary selections, and their feelings about rigor would be thought-provoking. It would be interesting to note how they viewed classroom instructional

changes, or if they perceived that it had changed. Including student perception data along with staff perceptions and could provide multiple layers of input helping to inform changes in the action planning process.

This research could have been extended to explore how the growth of the teacher community impacted feelings of efficacy and professional growth. Although there is a significant body of research around professional learning communities, I believe there is work to be done in examining the impact of PLCs on the teachers' social-emotional state. The teacher community emerged as a prominent positive point for most of the participants in this study. I would like to extend this study by exploring how the teacher community impacts other aspects of education such as student achievement, teacher retention, and job satisfaction.

There is much work to be done to ensure equitable education for all students regardless of location, race, income level, and previous achievement data. I anticipate we will exhibit significant student achievement gains across all subgroups as the curriculum is used over the next five years. As my district moves through this process, I hope we do not lose the energy that the implementation generated. Creating sustainable systems for teacher support and expecting high levels of student engagement across all classrooms is the goal for future work. This can be achieved with persistence, open dialogue between leadership and teachers, and the continuing high expectations for all classrooms across the district.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to examine the perspectives of high school English teachers, high school principals, and district leaders of the curriculum implementation process in a rural, low-wealth, low-performing school district. Throughout this study, I reflected on my role in the district and how I could best support the teachers through

curriculum implementation, while ensuring students were receiving quality and rigorous instruction. The study generated recommendations for future curriculum implementation and has changed the way I will approach projects moving forward. I was intrigued by using the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model as the theoretical framework for this study. It provided a framework for the implementation work and a coding structure for the data.

Through this research, I encountered several other change management models that could inform future change efforts. John Kotter, a student of leadership and change, described eight stages that he found successful in managing change in an organization. After completing my data collection, I saw how these tenets applied to curriculum implementation. When I considered these eight tenets along with the Lippitt-Knoster Change Model, I saw the Kotter tenets as an expansion of the Lippitt-Knoster elements: (a) creating a sense of urgency; (b) pulling together a guiding team with the needed skills, credibility, connections, and authority to move things along; (c) creating an uplifting vision and strategy; (d) communicating the vision and strategy through a combination of words, deeds, and symbols; (e) removing obstacles, or empowering people to move ahead; (f) producing visible signs of progress through short-term victories; (g) sticking with the process and refusing to quit when things get tough; (f) nurturing and shaping a new culture to support the emerging innovative ways (Bolman et al., 2006 pp. 461-462).

Because of this study, I will continue to gather regular feedback from all people involved in the work of the district. Facilitating focus groups and interviews gave me a unique opportunity to interact them. I have worked with teachers and principals in meetings, and informally one on one, but had not engaged in specific inquiry and dialogue using a structured protocol. Through the process, I discovered perceptions are powerful and drive reality.

People's perceptions are how they experienced an event and that carries weight. In *Learning to Improve; How America's Schools can get Better at Getting Better,* the author states:

"Becoming more user-centered is key to accomplishing these goals. At its most basic level, being user-centered means respecting the people who actually do the work by seeking to understand the problems they confront. It means engaging these people in designing changes that align with the problems they really experience" (Bryk et al., 2017 pp. 32-33).

In this study, listening and seeking to understand was the key to unlocking transformative processes. Seeking to understand provided the vehicle for building community among the staff and, as a result, implementing the changes needed to work towards instructional equity in the district.

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# APPENDICES

# Appendix A

## Focus Group/Interview Protocol

Teachers across this district have been engaged in English Language Arts curriculum implementation. These questions seek to collect information on teacher perceptions about the implementation process. These questions will be asked to high school English teachers. Thank you for participating in this research. I want to remind you that you have the right to withdraw from this research at any time. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about your experiences with the curriculum implementation.

1. What is your role in the district?
2. How long have you been an educator?
3. What is your understanding of why the district decided to implement this curriculum?
4. What was helpful to you when implementing this curriculum?
5. If you experienced stress or difficulty during the implementation, what could have helped reduce or alleviate those experiences?
6. How have you been involved in the implementation process?
7. What benefits did you experience during implementation?
8. Were there any resources provided to you during the implementation and if so, what was your experience with the resources?
9. Could you describe your overall perception of the implementation?
10. How successful have you felt in your implementation of this curriculum?
11. Is there anything you would have done differently in your implementation?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding this curriculum implementation?

# Appendix B

## Questionnaire

**A Case Study of the Curriculum Implementation Process in a Low-Wealth School District**

Q1 **Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research**

**Title of Study:** A Case Study of the Curriculum Implementation Process in a Low-Wealth School District: An Examination of the Perspectives of High School English Teachers, High School Principals, and District Leaders
**IRB Protocol** 26603
**Principal Investigator(s)**: Amy Levin Jones
**Funding Source**: None
**NC State Faculty Point of Contact**: Dr. Lisa R. Bass

You are invited to take part in a research study. Here are some important things to know:

-Your participation in this study is voluntary.
-You can choose not to participate without penalty.
-If you decide to participate and change your mind, you can stop participating at any time without penalty.
-The purpose of this research study is to collect information on teacher, principal, and district leaders' perceptions of the curriculum implementation process.
-You will be asked to respond to a questionnaire, or participate in a focus group, or participate in an interview.
-You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies may pose risks to those who participate.
-You may want to participate in this research because the findings will assist our school district and other school districts with strengthening curriculum implementation processes.
-If you have questions about your participation in this research at any time, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office via email at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1-919-515-8754

Please read the rest of this consent form for more specific details of this research. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information.

**What is the purpose of this study?** The purpose of the study is to collect information on high school English teachers', high school principals', and district leaders' perceptions of the curriculum implementation process.

**How many people will be in the study?**
There will be approximately 30 participants in this study.

**Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**
In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and teach high school English, or, be a high school principal, or be a school district leader.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**
If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to do some of the following:
-Respond to a questionnaire

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this questionnaire is approximately 45 minutes.

**Benefits to participating in this research**
There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are your contributions will contribute to the body of knowledge around curriculum implementation for future implementation projects.

**Risks to participating in this research**

There is minimal risk associated with your participation in this research.

**What data will be collected about me and are there risks associated with that?**
The data that are collected about you include your number of years of teaching experience, race/ethnicity, and gender. The risks to you as a result of collecting this information are none. These risks will be mitigated through implementing data protections in accordance with NC State data protection standards.

**How will my identity and the data about me be stored and protected?**
After all data is collected, the researchers will go through the data and remove all direct and indirect identifiers from the dataset and create a coded list that connects your real identity to the dataset.

This list will be stored separately from the data. After the study is over, we will permanently delete the master list. It is unlikely your identity could be deduced from your responses in the dataset without the master list.

We will go through your responses and the transcripts and do our best to remove or replace any information that can identify you directly. Examples of the information we will remove are your name, your school name, the district name. After we do this, it is unlikely your identity could be deduced from your responses.

**Who can access my data and how will my data be shared and used in the future?**
Your data will not be used or shared for future research studies. We will delete your data after three years.

**How will the data about me be reported to the public and are there risks associated with that?**
We may quote you or share specific responses from you in our publications and presentations but we will not include your name or any other information that could easily identify you. As a result, there are minimal risks to you as a result of how we report the data.

**Right to withdraw your participation  Your participation is voluntary.**
Even if you agree initially, consent is an ongoing process. You can stop participating at any time for any reason. To do so, tell the researcher at aljone26@ncsu.edu or 252-864-7174. Or you can contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Lisa R. Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu or 984-888-3294.

If you withdraw, we will stop any procedures or data collection that may be happening. We will also delete any data that's already been collected from you whenever possible. We will not be able to delete your data if we cannot identify which responses are yours or if the data has already been published. The data will be de-identified at the end of the study.

**Compensation**
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**What if you are an employee?**
Your participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment. Your participation or lack thereof will not affect your job.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Amy Jones, at aljone26@ncsu.edu and 252-864-7174. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Lisa R. Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu or 984-888-3294.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/

Q2 By signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. If I consent to participate, I understand that I can stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

- ○ I confirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I accept the above terms, and voluntarily participate in this study. (1)
- ○ I do not accept the above terms and do not wish to participate in this study. (2)

Q1 1. Please share your name.

Q2 Do you teach High School English in Lenoir County Public Schools?

- ○ No (1)
- ○ Yes (2)

Q3 How long have you been a High School English Teacher?

- ○ 0 - 3 years (1)
- ○ 4 - 10 years (2)
- ○ 11 - 20 years (3)
- ○ 21 - 25 years (4)
- ○ 25 or more years (5)

Q4 What is your age range?

- ○ 21 - 30 (1)
- ○ 31 - 35 (2)
- ○ 36 - 40 (3)
- ○ 41 - 45 (4)
- ○ 46 - 50 (5)
- ○ 51 - 55 (6)
- ○ 56 or more (7)

Q5 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary / third gender (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)

Q6 Are you of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q7 Choose one or more races that you consider yourself to be

- White or Caucasian (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (6)
- Prefer not to say (7)

End of Block: Background Information

Start of Block: Curriculum Implementation Questionnaire

Q8 I have a strong understanding of why the district decided to implement this curriculum.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q9 I have received help or support in the implementation of this curriculum.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q10 Implementing this curriculum has been stressful.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q11 Teachers have been involved in the curriculum implementation process.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q12 I have benefited professionally from the implementation of this curriculum.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q13 I was provided resources to assist with the curriculum implementation.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q14 Could you describe your overall perception of the implementation?

Q15 I have felt successful in the implementation of this curriculum.

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Somewhat disagree (2)
- Somewhat agree (3)
- Strongly agree (4)

Q16 Is there anything you would have done differently in your implementation? If so, could you share what you would have done differently?

Q17 Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding this curriculum implementation?

Q18 Would you be willing to participate in a focus group or an interview as a follow up to this questionnaire?

- Yes (1)
- Maybe (2)
- No (6)

# Appendix C

## Consent Form

### Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

**Title of Study:** A Case Study of the Curriculum Implementation Process in a Low-Wealth School District: An Examination of the Perspectives of High School English Teachers, High School Principals, and District Leaders
**IRB Protocol** 26603
**Principal Investigator(s):** Amy Levin Jones

**Funding Source:** None

**NC State Faculty Point of Contact:** Dr. Lisa R. Bass

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You are invited to take part in a research study. Here are some important things to know:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate and change your mind, you can stop participating at any time without penalty.
- The purpose of this research study is to collect information on teacher, principal, and district leaders' perceptions of the curriculum implementation process.
- You will be asked to respond to a questionnaire, or participate in a focus group, or participate in an interview.
- You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies may pose risks to those who participate.
- You may want to participate in this research because the findings will assist our school districts and other school districts with strengthening curriculum implementation processes.
- If you have questions about your participation in this research at any time, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office via email at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1-919-515-8754

Please read the rest of this consent form for more specific details of this research. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information.

**What is the purpose of this study?**
The purpose of the study is to collect information on high school English teachers', high school principals', and district leaders' perceptions of the curriculum implementation process.

**How many people will be in the study?**
There will be approximately 30 participants in this study.

**Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**
In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and teach high school English, or, be a high school principal, or be a school district leader.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to do some of the following:

1. Respond to a questionnaire (high school English teachers)
2. Participate in a focus group (high school English teachers, high school principals, district leaders)
3. Participate in an individual interview (high school English teachers)
4. You will be provided a copy of your research data so that you can confirm the accuracy of the information collected. You can indicate if there's any information or identifiers you want us to delete or not share.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study will be up to three hours.

**Recording in research**

Participants will be audio recorded. If you do not want this information collected, you cannot participate in this research.

We would like to use these recordings for transcription only. We will keep these recordings until transcriptions have been verified.

**Benefits to participating in this research**

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are your contributions will contribute to the body of knowledge around curriculum implementation for future implementation projects.

**Risks to participating in this research**

There is minimal risk associated with your participation in this research.

**What data will be collected about me and are there risks associated with that?**

The data that are collected about you will include your number of years of teaching experience. The risks to you as a result of collecting this information are none. These risks will be mitigated through implementing data protections in accordance with NC State data protection standards.

**How will my identity and the data about me be stored and protected?**

After all data is collected, the researchers will go through the data and remove all direct and indirect identifiers from the dataset and create a coded list that connects your real identity to the dataset.

This list will be stored separately from the data. After the study is over, we will permanently delete the master list. It is unlikely your identity could be deduced from your responses in the dataset without the master list.

We will go through your responses and the transcripts and do our best to remove or replace any information that can identify you directly. Examples of the information we will remove are your name, your school name, the district name. After we do this, it is unlikely your identity could be deduced from your responses.

**Who can access my data and how will my data be shared and used in the future?**

Your data will not be used or shared for future research studies. We will delete your data after three years.

**How will the data about me be reported to the public and are there risks associated with that?**
We may quote you or share specific responses from you in our publications and presentations but we will not include your name or any other information that could easily identify you. As a result, there are minimal risks to you as a result of how we report the data.

**Right to withdraw your participation**
Your participation is voluntary. Even if you agree initially, consent is an ongoing process. You can stop participating at any time for any reason. To do so, tell the researcher at aljone26@ncsu.edu or 252-864-7174. Or you can contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Lisa R. Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu or 984-888-3294.

If you withdraw, we will stop any procedures or data collection that may be happening. We will also delete any data that's already been collected from you whenever possible. We will not be able to delete your data if we cannot identify which responses are yours or if the data has already been published. The data will be de-identified at the end of the study.

**Compensation**
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**What if you are an employee?**
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**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Amy Jones, at aljone26@ncsu.edu and 252-864-7174. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Lisa R. Bass, at lrbass@ncsu.edu or 984-888-3294.

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If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/

**Consent to participate**
By signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. If I consent to participate, I understand that I can stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

☐ **Yes, I want to be in this research study.**

**Name**_____ **Today's Date** _____

☐ **No, I do not want to be in this research study.**
**Thank you for your consideration.**

## Appendix D

## Codebook

| Name | Description | Sources | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-Vision | Understanding the reason for the change, why the change is necessary, what goals are to be achieved, and what success will look like. | 8 | 28 |
| Subcategory Confusion | Not understanding why the change took place or is necessary. A lack of understanding of the goals to be achieved or what success will look like. | 5 | 11 |
| 2-Consensus | Widespread agreement and support for the change from key stakeholders. | 10 | 48 |
| Subcategory Sabotage | Actions that block the change. | 6 | 16 |
| 3-Skills | Expertise or training necessary to accomplish the change. | 9 | 35 |
| Subcategory Anxiety | Feelings of being unprepared to do the work. Participants are worried about failure. | 10 | 31 |
| 4-Incentives | How the change will benefit the participant or is meaningful to the participant. These can be intrinsic or extrinsic and directly link to the vision. | 10 | 40 |
| Subcategory Resistance | Slows the change. Participants may resort to doing things the way they have always been done. | 9 | 22 |
| 5-Resources | Materials or supports that help execute the change initiative. These can be physical or human resources. | 10 | 55 |
| Subcategory Frustration | Feelings of emotional tension due to the inability to change or achieve something | 11 | 44 |
| 6-Action Plan | Clear and detailed steps that must be taken to accomplish the vision. The action plan should be developed by a representation of the stakeholders and contains a way to track progress towards the change. The action plan is thoughtfully communicated to all stakeholders. | 14 | 59 |
| Subcategory False Starts | Steps towards accomplishing the change are taken but are repeated slowing the change process. | 12 | 50 |
| Emergent Themes | | | |
| Alignment | The elements of teaching, learning, and assessment come together to interact and support learning | 7 | 37 |

| Name | Description | Sources | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| | outcomes. | | |
| Autonomy | Self-direction, self-governance, self-regulation, and the experience of the freedom to choose. | 11 | 48 |
| Communication | The exchange of information that is used to express thoughts, ideas, feelings to others. | 9 | 25 |
| Community of Teachers | A formal or informal group of teachers who develop shared knowledge focused on a common goal. | 10 | 38 |
| Newsletter | The documents shared by the school district designed to impart the order and timing of the lessons. | 7 | 14 |
| Onboarding | The process of conveying the goals and expectations of the school district and an overview of the resources used to accomplish the goals and expectations. | 9 | 33 |
| Professional Growth | The increase of subject matter knowledge or skills related to teaching. | 8 | 28 |
| Rigor | The learning environment supports student acquisition of knowledge at high levels of cognitive demand. | 12 | 46 |
| Time | Teacher workflow and capacity for daily tasks. | 10 | 40 |

# Appendix E

## Questionnaire Results

1

Q8 - I have a strong understanding of why the district decided to implement this curriculum.


Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat agree [54%, 7] Strongly agree [46%, 6]

Q9 - I have received help or support in the implementation of this curriculum.


Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat agree [31%, 4] Strongly agree [69%, 9]

Q10 - Implementing this curriculum has been stressful.


Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [23%, 3] Somewhat agree [62%, 8] Strongly agree [15%, 2]

Q11 - Teachers have been involved in the curriculum implementation process.


Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat agree [69%, 9] Strongly agree [31%, 4]

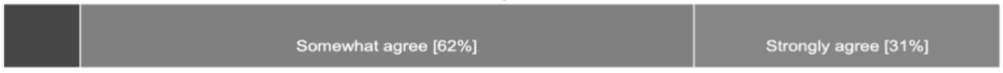
Q12 - I have benefited professionally from the implementation of this curriculum.


Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [8%, 1] Somewhat agree [69%, 9] Strongly agree [23%, 3]

Q13 - I was provided resources to assist with the curriculum implementation.


Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [8%, 1] Somewhat agree [46%, 6] Strongly agree [46%, 6]

Q15 - I have felt successful in the implementation of this curriculum.




Strongly disagree [0%, 0] Somewhat disagree [8%, 1] Somewhat agree [62%, 8] Strongly agree [31%, 4]

## Appendix F

## IRB Approval

**Date: December 8, 2023**
**Study Title: A Case Study of the Curriculum Implementation Process in a Low-Wealth School District: An Examination of the Perspectives of High School English Teachers, High School Principals, and District Leaders**
**NC State eIRB #: 26603**
**Funding Source: None**

**Dear Lisa Bass,**

**The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved on December 8, 2023 as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exempt FLEX Exempt). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review.**

**This approval for this research study does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation in accordance with the NC State university regulation and IRB unit standards.**

**NOTE:**

1. **This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NC State University projects, the assurance number is: FWA00003429.**

2. **Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation in accordance with the NC State university regulation and IRB unit standards.**

3. **If any problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.**
4. **For information regarding study closure or post approval monitoring activities, please refer to the NC State University IRB website.**

**To request an official, signed approval letter on NC State letterhead, please submit a request on our website under "Request a Letter"**

**Sincerely,**
**Jennie Ofstein, Ph.D.**
**Institutional Review Board (IRB) Director**
**North Carolina State University**
**irb-director@ncsu.edu**
**919.515.8754**