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Beyond Selection and Practice: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of K-5 Literacy Curriculum Leaders in Long Island, NY

Mary Elizabeth Pettit

BEYOND SELECTION AND PRACTICE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF K–5 LITERACY CURRICULUM LEADERS IN LONG ISLAND, NY

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A Dissertation Submitted to Molloy University
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by

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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

The dissertation of **Mary Elizabeth Pettit** entitled: *Beyond Selection and Practice: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of K-5 Literacy Curriculum Leaders on Long Island, NY,* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the School of Education and Human Services has been read and approved by the Committee:

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing cycle of educational reform in America has led policymakers and educational leaders to prioritize test-based results and de-prioritize noncognitive skills, equitable outcomes, and crucial socio-emotional aspects of schooling (Lynch et al., 2009). Despite the equitable goals outlined in previous education policy reforms, intended outcomes have been eclipsed by the toxic policymakers Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), which ultimately influences the curriculum selection and implementation process (Sahlburg, 2012). A literature review uncovers how inequity has been entrenched in the American education system since the 18th century, perpetuating social stratification and hindering efforts for equitable education reform. Drawing from accountability and critical leadership theoretical frameworks, this hermeneutic phenomenological research study focused on the perceptions of seven district-level literacy curriculum leaders from Long Island, NY, related to the influence of educational reform on the selection, implementation, and evaluation of K-5 literacy curriculum. The researcher collected data in four phases: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and member checks. Using Aguas' (2020) Fusion approach to data analysis facilitated connections between transcendental descriptions and hermeneutic interpretations. A neo-institutional framework was employed in the interpretive data analysis stage to inductively explore curriculum leaders' constraints within the more extensive institutional system. Findings reveal 1) notable disparities in perceptions of roles and duties among curriculum leaders, 2) the complexity of managing political and professional factors, 3) diverse approaches to selecting and evaluating literacy programs, 4) the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on curriculum leaders' ability to balance compliance structures with equity in literacy education, 5) curriculum leaders across Long Island exhibit varied prioritization of federal and state mandates and accountability

structures. As the field of education evolves, particularly in the post-pandemic era, it is crucial to

dissect these disparities and strive for a more uniform definition of a curriculum leader role.

Dismantling barriers to equity will require a recalibration of the curriculum selection,

implementation, and evaluation process. The researcher provided limitations and

recommendations for future research.

Key Terms: *Structural inequality, Accountability in education, Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), Educational Inequity, Audit Culture, Effective Leadership*, *Instructional Integrity*, *Organizational Legitimacy*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS/DEDICATION

I am dedicating my doctoral journey to my husband Bill, my children Emily and William, my mother Anna, and my mother-in-law Candra. Their unwavering support and love gave me the courage to forge on during the most challenging times and the confidence and grace to celebrate each milestone.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*"The history of public education in the United States may be
viewed as a constant struggle between the forces of those who
consistently espouse a message of hope and inclusion and
others who systematically plan for the layered hierarchies of
exclusion" (Ryan, 2020, p.2).*

Social cohesion and economic freedom have been attributed to a practical educational

experience in this country since its founding day and have been common themes threaded

throughout the intentions of most educational policies enacted since the 18th century (McGuinn,

2016). However, those historic intentions often must be revised to impactful reform outcomes

(Sahlberg, 2012). Understanding the landscape of American education requires one to

conceptualize the struggle between those in positions of power who encourage a system of social

hierarchy and those who question and disrupt the flawed design of the system. The structural

inequities and exclusionary traditions enforced by those in positions of power to justify a social

hierarchy have been evident throughout the history of American education (Neem, 2017). Fuller

and Stevenson (2019) suggested that educational policymakers, despite claims of good

intentions, struggle to balance traditional democratic values with political actions meant to

benefit those situated at the top of the social hierarchy. Regardless of policy reform verbiage

claiming to break down equity barriers, intentional or unintentional, if those in positions of

power continue to adopt policies that create opportunities for some and obstacles for others,

structural inequity will always prevail.

THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

The cyclical nature of structural inequity in American education, present since the 18th

century, may be challenging to identify on the initial read of any policy reform initiative,

especially if the equitable intentions and inclusionary nature of policy language are not measured

against actual outcomes. One might argue that our founding fathers signed the Constitution, the oldest written document considered the supreme law in the United States, with or without knowledge of all the unsaid words. While this landmark document outlines the fundamental rights of citizens and defines the jurisdictions of the central bodies of government, education is not recognized as a constitutionally protected right. In 1791, Congress enacted the 10th Amendment to address concerns expressed by states regarding an imbalance of decision-making power. Before the enactment, states' rights advocates feared the federal government would assert an imbalance of power.

While the 10th Amendment outlined a power transfer to the states that would allow state lawmakers to enforce educational decisions affecting their schools and communities, researchers have also described the unintended consequences of this exchange of power (Scribner, 2016). While some states, including New York in 1790, took action to ratify their constitutions to reflect their stance on free public education for all, others, like Texas, adopted policies to benefit some and marginalize others intentionally (American Immigration Council, 2016). According to the American Immigration Council, in 1975, more than two decades after the landmark decision of Brown v. The Board of Education by the U.S. The Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools is unconstitutional, and the Texas Legislature authorized local school districts to deny enrollment in public schools to foreign-born children who were not able to produce legal documentation of their citizenship in the United States.

Almost a half-century later, despite intentions outlined in the 10th Amendment regarding the federal government's limited role in regulating education, the power struggle between state and federal governments continues (Horsford et al., 2019). McGuinn (2016) stated that the federal government's role is increasing. Research shows that the federal government's influence

on policy reform is unprecedented (Koretz, 2017; Scribner, 2016). The ongoing power struggle between federal and state entities is driven by a 19th-century hegemonic ideology that illustrates several steps backward toward perpetuating inequity and an imbalance of power (Givens & Ison, 2023; Sahlberg, 2012). This toxic ideology continues to play a significant role in creating structures of power and domination in American education.

Global Education Reform Movement: A Toxic Ideology Drives Policy Reform

Landmark policy shifts driven by a GERM, a dangerous conviction, indoctrinate education systems unprepared to bolster the countless education policy reform intentions like equitable outcomes (Carey et al., 2023; Sahlberg, 2012). According to Murgatroyd and Sahlberg (2016), the most telling symptoms of this orthodoxy can be measured by the desire to increase standardization, narrow curriculum, employ high-stakes testing, and use corporate management tools borrowed from the business world. The motivation to privatize education is a crucial belief and a telltale sign that education reform is motivated by this hegemonic ideology and driven by economic profit rather than guided by moral goals and social development (Horsford et al., 2019; Welner & Weitzman, 2005). Given the fact that the U.S. is the only member country of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child not to ratify its constitution to uphold education as a human right, it seems only natural for stakeholders to question if the U.S. government intends to maintain a divided class structure meant to serve only those in power.

Research suggests that below the surface of any educational policy, beyond the intentions of a political agenda or accountability structure, and at the very core of equity initiatives lies the root cause of a critical issue: the conviction and belief system held by those in power (Carey et al., 2023; Cross, 2004; Dulude & Milley, 2021; Sahlburg, 2012). Stakeholders who engage in policy discourse question the connection between past failed policies and the underlying

convictions and beliefs of policymakers in power (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019). This infectious orthodoxy, appropriately named GERM, lives at the intersection of federal education policy and organizational accountability and prevents this country from sustaining an equitable, high-performing education system built on our schools' strength and moral health (Murgatroyd & Sahlburg, 2016). This approach to policy reform driven by GERM will continue to yield the same outcomes, most significantly, a system built to sustain a social class hierarchy.

Policy Reform, Accountability, and Political Power

One landmark federal policy that changed how and to whom public schools in every state provide education services can be dated back to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 (ESEA, 1965). The ESEA outlined specific mandates to prioritize equitable access to high-quality curriculum, resources, and instruction to close the achievement gap between the rich and poor (Meier & Wood, 2004). Before this act, no federal policy existed outlining expectations of an equitable education (Skinner, 2022). While Johnson's vision paved the way for states to comply with equitable education opportunities, it became clear that enacting such policy without accountability structures challenged lawmakers to evaluate if and how states complied with policy reform (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). This power struggle between federal, state, and local education agencies led to the Title 1-A amendment of ESEA that required public schools in every state to meet accountability requirements, such as performance reporting, as a condition for receiving funding (Skinner, 2022).

Hanushek and Rivkin (2010) described trends of increasing federal control over school districts since the 1970s, creating an imbalance of power. When the federal government inserts more control over local schools, it inserts more control over districts stripped of their ability to

maintain autonomy (Sahlberg, 2012; Zane, 2012). Researchers indicate that every new federal education policy initiative since ESEA has resulted in increased accountability measures tying high-stakes testing achievement to financial incentives and resource distribution (Carey et al., 2023; El Moussaoui, 2017; Horsford et al., 2019; Zarra, 2016). Education stakeholders continue to question the ability of federal education policymakers to deliver on their promises of equitable access to free public education for all students (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019; Horsford et al., 2019; Oakes, 1986; Welner & Weitzman, 2005; Zarra, 2016). Specifically, Mintrop and Sunderman (2009) showed that while some evidence exists to suggest an increase in overall standardized test achievement, little evidence exists to show a narrowing of the achievement gap between students in White privileged communities and students in underprivileged, underserved Black and minority communities.

Carey et al. (2023) outlined the need for policy reform, including opportunity-to-learn standards, to advance an accountability system with reciprocal measures. Under current policy structures, students from predominantly White privileged, economically advantaged communities benefit from the newly adopted curriculum and programmatic enhancements. In contrast, historically marginalized Black and minority students are subjected to failed policy reform and a flawed accountability structure. Therefore, stakeholders argue that an accountability structure that outlines the best intentions for equity in education will fail to produce promised outcomes if schools in underserved communities are consistently denied the resources required to progress toward equality of opportunity for all students.

According to Jensen (2009), there is a $23 billion annual funding gap between predominately White and racially diverse districts, as well as gaps between high and low-poverty districts. Morgan (2018) also reported that districts in the highest poverty areas receive 7% less

per pupil in state and local funding than those in economically advantaged districts. The barriers to a sustainable and equitable education system are more difficult to combat with each bureaucratically led policy reform initiative employing features perpetuating oppression (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Zarra, 2016). Researchers have argued that this toxic reform cycle is driven and perpetuated by the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), a toxic ideology (Sahlberg, 2012). Despite what the research illustrates about the apparent connections between funding gaps and achievement gaps, as well as privileged communities and underprivileged communities, the toxic reform cycle continues.

GERM Drives Education Reform in Long Island School Districts

The study focused on exploring the lived experience of curriculum leaders in public schools in Long Island, New York (NY). Long Island districts are diverse across socioeconomic backgrounds, race, and ethnicity. It is necessary to understand how schools in Long Island, NY, are structured to understand better and interpret the lived experiences of school district curriculum leaders. According to the New York State Department of Education (2023) (NYSED), there are approximately 125 public school districts across Long Island. In 2000, 12% of the districts had a minority majority, compared to 26% in 2020. Additionally, Morgan (2018) reported that school districts serving the largest populations of Black, Latino, or American Indians receive about $1,800 (13%) less per student in state and local funding than those districts that serve a majority of White students.

In 2021, 29% of the public school districts in Nassau County and 41% of the public school districts in Suffolk County were considered economically underprivileged. According to the NYS Department of Education (2020-2021), more than 30% of the districts across Long Island are located in economically disadvantaged communities. Nationwide demographic shifts,

like those seen across Long Island in the past decade, have prompted the federal government to take control of policy reform to address educational inequities. Policy reform initiatives like increased island-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, shifts toward culturally relevant pedagogy, a push to evaluate curriculum, and initiatives to recruit teachers of color have been documented (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Despite efforts to align curriculum and instruction to the shifting diverse demographic, a clear divide exists between district resources, mandates, and access to equitable curriculum (Morgan, 2018). The unsustainable cycle of nationwide policy reform described in the literature mirrors policy failures documented across Long Island.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Politicians who have initiated or amended education policies that enforce stricter organizational accountability structures while claiming to prioritize equitable access to high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students continue to fail at accomplishing and sustaining such promises (Carey et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dulude & Milley, 2021). Research supports how each new federal policy reform since the adoption of ESEA in 1965 has mandated an elevation in high-stakes testing, perpetuating a market logic that incentivizes schools for high performance and punishes schools for poor performance (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Payne, 2008; Welner & Weitzman, 2005). The relentless focus on standardized test achievement has caused leaders to put less emphasis on noncognitive skills, equitable outcomes for all, and essential socio-emotional facets of schooling (Lynch et al., 2009). It makes sense to argue that education policy initiatives driven by hegemonic convictions like GERM will always prevent schools from achieving the intended equitable outcomes.

The increase in structural accountability measures evident in each past policy reform allows a cycle of unsustainable outcomes to continue. While schools in privileged areas with access to abundant resources and high-quality instruction receive additional incentives in funding, schools in underprivileged areas deemed underperforming are subjected to the loss of funding and governmental take-over (Meier & Wood, 2004; Peterson & West, 2003). Despite decades worth of research illustrating how educational policy reform perpetuates a toxic cycle of accountability, minimal empirical studies exist that explore how literacy curriculum leaders, as situated members of a larger political arena, perceive and navigate the various complexities of this cycle to make informed programmatic curriculum decisions (Chan et al., 2022). Seidman (2019) stated that of all the abundant research conducted in the United States on critical issues in education, only some focus on the stakeholders' perspectives. This research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how elementary-level curriculum leaders in Long Island, NY, perceive their role and navigate the structures of an accountability cycle when making equitable decisions about literacy curriculum that align with intended district outcomes.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of elementary-level curriculum leaders in Long Island, NY, in how they perceive their roles as curriculum leaders and how they describe their experiences in navigating the structures of organizational accountability when making decisions about literacy curriculum. Exploring the lived experience of curriculum leaders is better understood through the descriptions of how they "make sense of, interpret, reconcile, and counterbalance competing accountability demands from multiple and incompatible logics while considering their school needs" (Dulude & Milley, 2021, p. 84).

Developing an in-depth understanding of participant experiences revealed a shared

meaning between a larger community and ultimately created a sense of a social situation that

may not have been readily transparent (Bhattacharya, 2017). Detailed descriptions of how

curriculum leaders in Long Island perceive and navigate federal organizational accountability

structures when making decisions about literacy curriculum can build bridges between research,

practice, and policymakers (Horsford et al., 2019). Unless researchers conduct more empirical

research to understand better how stakeholders like curriculum leaders navigate this structure of

accountability, those with a toxic hegemonic orthodoxy will be in control of making decisions

concerning access to public education, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1*: Visual formation of the problem and purpose*

Note: Graphic portrayal of the researcher's process in developing the problem, purpose, and research questions that guided this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guided this research:

1. How do literacy curriculum leaders describe their lived experience when engaging in their role of selecting and evaluating curriculum?
   a. What do curriculum leaders describe as challenges in navigating the literacy curriculum selection and evaluation process?
2. How do curriculum leaders describe the influence of institutional policy shifts on their role in the literacy curriculum decision-making process?
   a. How do curriculum leaders perceive the influence of federal and state-mandated high-stakes testing on aligning equitable policy initiatives with selected literacy curricula?
   b. How do curriculum leaders describe the influence of federal and state-mandated compliance structures on their role in equitable curriculum selection?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructivism is an interpretive framework grounded in ontological assumptions relying on participant views to inductively generate themes and meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivist researchers use an open-ended method of questioning to allow participants to construct meaning. In addition, researchers with a social constructivist worldview allow their own experience and background to guide their interpretation of findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Like a social constructivist approach, researchers with a critical constructivist worldview believe that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed. However, critical constructivists maintain that phenomena can be best understood by critically thinking about the connection between culture, institutions, and historical contexts (Kincheloe, 2005). By engaging in critical discourse that seeks to construct deeper meaning about the influences of socio-historic dynamics, social constructivists aim to question the imbalance of power and incite

social justice change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A critical social constructivist worldview aligns with this qualitative research study because the researcher aimed to create a deeper understanding of curriculum leaders' lived experiences in navigating the structures of organizational accountability when making decisions about literacy curricula.

THEORETICAL ROADMAP

A literature review provided a critical perspective on the cycle and challenges of institutional accountability and its impact on education policy reform by applying the tenets of accountability and critical leadership theories. Specifically, using the tenets of critical leadership theory illustrated how past politicians have employed the toxic ideology, GERM, described by Sahlberg (2012), to initiate policy reform. An accountability framework provided a theoretical perspective in which to analyze how past education policy perpetuated a political process that demanded desirable outcomes for White middle-class communities while denying the same for Black, Hispanic, and indigenous low socio-economic class community members. In addition, applying the tenets of a neo-institutional framework in the analysis stage allowed the researcher to view the restraints on the choices and actions of curriculum leaders who are part of a more extensive institutional system and allowed emerging theories to develop inductively.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

The researcher used a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to gain an in-depth understanding of curriculum leaders' lived experience in how they perceive their role and navigate the structures of an accountability cycle when selecting and evaluating curriculum. A fusion data collection and analysis approach allowed the researcher to acquire knowledge and demonstrate in-depth understandings emerging from a transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Aguas, 2022). Data collection sources included questionnaires,

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semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant/researcher journals. The researcher used Aguas' Fusion framework to guide the collection of data and the process of analysis to weave together the knowledge with how this knowledge created an in-depth understanding for both participants and the researcher.

Setting and Participants

Using purposeful sampling, seven participants were chosen who met the criteria of serving as either an elementary or district-level literacy curriculum leader in a public school within Long Island, New York, notwithstanding the diverse titles they held. These titles included K-12 Coordinator of Reading/AIS/RTI, Director of Elementary Curriculum and Assessment, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, and Assistant of Curriculum, Instruction, and Personnel. Selected participants were considered district or elementary-level literacy curriculum leaders if their responsibilities included selecting, evaluating, and implementing literacy curricula and having served in a curriculum leadership role for at least one year. In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted at the offices of all seven districts, with three located in Nassau County and four in Suffolk County. A focus group meeting was held via Zoom two weeks after the last individual interview, taking into account participant availability and time constraints.

Data Collection

The proposed four phases of data collection were inspired by Seidman's (2019) structure for in-depth phenomenological interviewing and Aguas' (2022) in-depth fusion approach for data collection and analysis. Data collection began in Phase 1 with a questionnaire sent via email to participants to elicit descriptive profile information and demographic data, including

leadership title and years of experience as a literacy curriculum leader. In Phase 2, during semi-structured individual interviews, the researcher developed meaning and understanding by inviting participants to describe their lived experience in their curriculum leader role and navigating the challenges of organizational accountability structures when selecting and evaluating curriculum. The focus group in Phase 3 took place within one week of the last participant interview session and was held virtually due to participant availability. During the focus group, participants described the rewarding and challenging structures of their curriculum leader roles and lived experiences as elementary-level curriculum leaders navigating the challenges of organizational accountability when making curriculum decisions. Participant/researcher journals were used during the focus group to generate analytic memos after the first read of raw data—emerging themes from participants' shared experiences provided the researcher with opportunities to interpret data inductively. Using a member check questionnaire in Phase 4 of data collection allowed participants to act as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge and understanding. At the same time, the researcher avoided a biasing effect on participant views implicit in their shared experience (Aguas, 2022).

Data Analysis

The researcher used multiple methods and triangulation, a critical component of data collection and analysis procedure (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). In addition, a fusion approach, an iterative process in which the researcher combines transcendental epistemology (Moustakas, 1994) and hermeneutic methodology (Van Manen, 1990), was employed to arrive at meaning, understanding, and interpretation. Recorded interviews were uploaded to Rev.com for transcription. The researcher uploaded transcripts to Dedoose, a web-based application tailored for qualitative and mixed-methods research. This platform furnished tools for organizing,

analyzing, and interpreting the text derived from the first round of semi-structured interviews and a second round of focus groups. The data analysis process for the research study encompassed two cycles of coding. The first cycle of descriptive coding was done inductively, and the primary content of uploaded transcripts was summarized using simple word phrases (Lungu, 2022). After descriptive codes were established, In Vivo coding helped to identify broad categories. In Vivo coding allowed the researcher to analyze participants' verbatim responses further using a neo-institutional theoretical framework to guide an in-depth understanding of how the structures of a political institution restrain the choices and actions of individuals who are part of the institutional system (Dulude & Milley, 2021).

Subsequently, the researcher curated data sets to systematize interview excerpts based on these codes as part of the second coding cycle. Upon downloading the data sets, the researcher printed them for further analysis, manually color-coded participant responses, and exhibited them on chart paper. This visual aid facilitated the identification of emerging themes. In Vivo coding was then employed to categorize these codes into six overarching themes, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the research questions and participants' dialogue during interview and focus group sessions. Noted themes included Curriculum Leader Role, Curriculum Leader Challenges, ELA Curriculum and Program Selection Process, Institutional Policy Shifts, Mandated Compliance Structures and Data Reporting, and Mandated Testing and Universal Equitable Policies. Research questions delved into various aspects of curriculum selection and evaluation, institutional policy shifts, and the influence of federal and state-mandated testing and compliance structures on equitable curriculum selection. Using a non-linear process and bracketing, the researcher reviewed journal notes and memos reflecting participants' behavior during each encounter to establish a deeper understanding. The analysis highlighted the intricate

interplay between policy mandates, organizational accountability, and the decision-making processes of curriculum leaders within the larger political landscape, emphasizing the complex challenges they face in navigating through these dynamics.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Since phenomenological data analysis does not follow a prescribed process to achieve in-depth understanding, findings are subjective and situated within the researcher's conceptualization of the explicit idea and interpretative process (Giorgi, 2006). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on thick descriptions of participants' lived and shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Some might argue that findings from a hermeneutic phenomenological study are subjective and situated within the researcher's conceptualization of the explicit idea and interpretive process (Bhattacharya, 2017). Therefore, as a researcher, it is imperative to have the ability to bracket personal beliefs and assumptions.

Each data collection phase relied on participant availability; thus, four of the seven participants were available for focus group meetings. Since three participants could only attend with 100% participation in the focus group, the researcher needed help understanding their shared experiences. Additionally, while the researcher attempted to use purposeful sampling strategies to gain the participation of curriculum leaders from various demographically diverse districts across Long Island, it depended on the availability and consent of those willing to participate.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Strategies for obtaining trustworthy findings included using an initial questionnaire to obtain descriptive data, semi-structured and focus group interview protocols, peer review and member checking, and the use of researcher and participant journals. Each data collection phase

was thoroughly documented in a researcher journal, and interview transcripts were shared with participants during the last data collection phase to ensure the accuracy of intended responses.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this hermeneutic phenomenological study add to an existing robust body of literature suggesting an interconnectedness between the historically implemented federal policy mandates driven by hegemonic ideology and the unsustainable educational outcomes described by researchers (Carey et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Horsford et al., 2019; Murgatroyd & Sahlberg, 2016; Zarra, 2016). In addition, findings raise awareness about the importance of stakeholder involvement and the need for curriculum leaders to challenge the status quo. Ultimately, the researcher used purposeful sampling techniques to encourage participation from demographically diverse public schools across Long Island, NY, to explore elementary-level literacy curriculum leader perspectives. An iterative analysis process allowed the researcher to interpret data, note emerging theories, and add a new layer of in-depth understanding to position and empower stakeholders, who have historically been silenced, to take a seat at the forefront of education policy decision-making.

Key Terms

Structural inequality: disparities in wealth, resources, and other outcomes that result from discriminatory practices of institutions (Neem, 2017).

Accountability in education: "a system driven by quotas and sanctions stipulating the progression of underperforming schools through sanctions based on meeting performance quotas for specific demographic groups" (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009, p. 363).

Global Education Reform Movement (GERM): a dangerous orthodoxy that serves to indoctrinate the education system, which is already unprepared to sustain equitable policy reform (Sahlberg, 2012).

Educational Inequity: The unequal distribution of academic resources, including but not limited to school funding, qualified and experienced teachers, books, and technologies, to socially excluded communities (Carey et al., 2023).

Audit Culture: A neo-liberal attempt to devalue the work of educators and contribute to an inefficient and unsustainable educational system by using immeasurable structures of accountability (Strathern, 2000).

Effective Leader: One who inspires, motivates, and directs activities to help achieve group or organizational goals (Avelar La Salle & Johnson, 2019).

Instructional Integrity: Curriculum leaders are working to transform infrastructure to balance instruction with policy (liability) (Spillane & Kenney, 2012).

Organizational Legitimacy: Using persuasion to convince teachers to head and respond to new policy focused on meeting centrally defined standards (Accountability) (Spillane & Kenney, 2012).

Predominately White Institution: According to the US Department of Education, a predominantly white institution is one in which 50% or more of the student body is White.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of failing public school policy in America has been documented throughout literature and attributed to relentless and unsuccessful efforts by federal and state agencies to enact policies that restore democratic participation (Debray, 2015). Research indicates that equity in education can be achieved through efforts that alleviate levels of concentrated poverty, equalize housing opportunities for low-income and underserved minorities, and address fund allocation disparities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, some may argue that any intended progress toward equity through policy reform has been directly connected to federal control over states concerning public education. Spillane and Kenney (2012) suggested that when government agencies dominate the reform limelight, local districts are left scrambling to develop measures of compliance and conformity, a process that Strathern (2000) referred to as an "audit culture" (p. 2). When the federal government inserts control over states, it triggers a power struggle that perpetuates a toxic cycle of never-ending reform. State and local education stakeholders argue the importance of shifting decision-making power back to the states so local agencies can maintain a front-row seat at the policy reform table.

Federal policymakers who employ an outcomes-based approach to education reform perpetuate a cycle of inequity harmful to students in underserved minority communities (Carey et al., 2023; Debray, 2015). According to the New York State Department of Education (2023), between 2000 and 2017, the percentage of White school-age children decreased from 62% to 51%. The percentage of Black school-age children decreased from 15% to 14%, and the percentages of Hispanic and Asian school-age children increased from 16% to 25%, indicating a more diverse landscape than ever. The Southern Education Foundation (2009) reported that in 2005, 76% of the nation's lowest-income population attended schools in districts with a per-pupil

spending ratio that fell below the national average. As an increasing number of culturally diverse students enroll in public schools across this country, it is more imperative now than ever to address the historic policy failures of the American education system in providing equitable education reform.

This literature review includes an examination of U.S. education reform trends and an evaluation of the impact of policy reform on schools nationwide, specifically across Long Island, New York. Additionally, research supports that GERM has been the underlying toxic ideology behind all federal education policies enacted in this country. Figure 2 depicts an accountability cycle illustrating the influence of politics on policy mandates and shows how curriculum leaders, as situated members of this large political arena, are part of this relentless cycle. Furthermore, the literature highlights how policy reform has influenced shifts in curriculum. This literature review contributes a new understanding of how an accountability cycle challenges curriculum leaders in selecting and evaluating curricula. The tenets of an accountability and critical leadership theoretical framework conceptualize the problem described in this qualitative research study.

Figure 2*: Accountability Cycle*
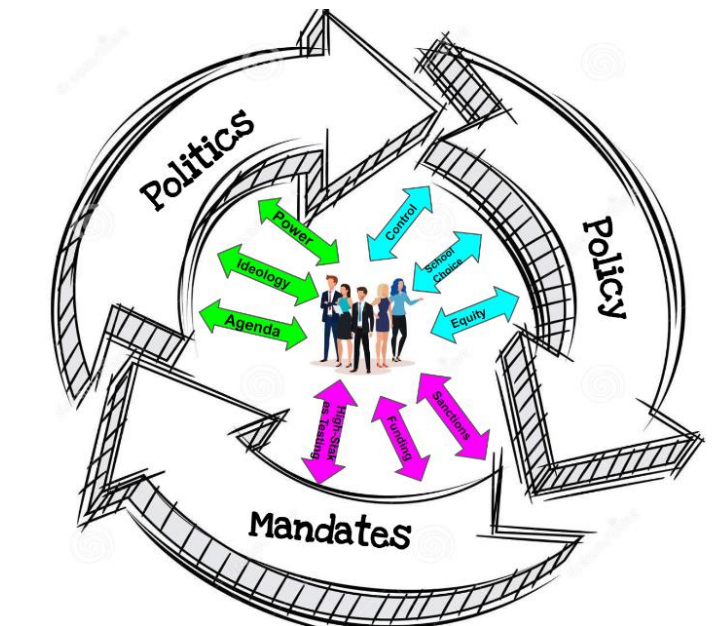
Note: This infographic is a visual representation of the described accountability cycle.

Global Education Reform Movement: The Ideology Behind Federal Education Reform

Increased accountability driven by GERM ideology has been the recipe for policy failure in American Education since the mid-1960s. Research suggests that education has increasingly become a central focus of federal politics and elections since the 1960's (Cohen, 1982). Republicans and Democrats have attempted to position themselves ideologically to appeal to voters (Horsford et al., 2019; McGuinn, 2016). Sahlburg (2012) maintained that federal policy shifts are driven by GERM, a dangerous orthodoxy that serves to indoctrinate the education system, one that is already unprepared to sustain equitable policy reform. Although there is no shortage of literature describing the ill effects of federal education policy shifts in schools across the nation, research shows that states have historically faced a conundrum relative to federal funding (Hess & Eden, 2017; Horsford et al., 2019; Meier & Wood, 2004; Peterson & West, 2003). Although states often welcome funding opportunities offered by the federal government,

they also fear the loss of their local and state autonomy (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Two significant factors perpetuating a systematic accountability structure include the elected official's personal and political agenda. Despite the federal government's increasing role in how states structure their schools in the past century, researchers have noted a decline in achievement, growth, and proficiency (Koretz, 2017). This decline is directly connected to reported achievement gaps among students at the national level compared to international students of the same age (McGuinn, 2016).

Theoretical Frameworks

The tenets of a critical social framework guided the researcher when describing current research and interpreting findings, ultimately empowering participants to engage in critical discourse about their constructed meaning. Critical social theory encompasses frameworks that attempt to identify, understand, and act on root causes that contribute to societal inequities, an imbalance of power, and cultural supremacy (Agger, 2013). Using a critical theoretical lens to analyze what research suggests about federal involvement in education will allow all stakeholders to push their thinking about the systematic failures of policy in American education. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, a critical lens will help stakeholders gain a more in-depth understanding of how some education reforms intended to help underserved students have actually "contributed to this demoralizing result" (Koretz, 2017, p. 117). By applying accountability and critical leadership theoretical frameworks, the researcher can identify the challenges of organizational accountability to provide a critical perspective. Specifically, reviewing what literature suggests about how accountability structures contributed to restructuring a social hierarchy in American society using this lens will contribute to a more in-depth understanding (Jennings & Sohn, 2014). In addition, applying the tenets of critical

leadership theory will illustrate how politicians engage in discourse and identify or describe systems of oppression (Ylimaki, 2011). A neo-institutional framework was used in the data analysis stage to advance an understanding of how institutional structures like accountability restrain the choices and actions of curriculum leaders in a political arena.

Accountability Theoretical Framework

Researchers describe accountability in education as "a system driven by quotas and sanctions stipulating the progression of underperforming schools through sanctions based on meeting performance quotas for specific demographic groups" (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009, p. 363). Education policymakers claim that through reform efforts, the mission of the American education system is to close achievement gaps by identifying and supporting low-performing schools (Carey et al., 2023). However, the research tells a different story. Researchers maintain that a sanctions-based accountability system's high-stakes nature has failed and will likely fail if outcomes are ambiguous, impractical, and foster defensiveness among constituents responsible for curriculum selection and performance reporting (Argyris, 1990; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009).

Levin (1974) described four distinct processes that are part of an accountability framework, including accountability as a process of performance reporting, which assumes the mere reporting of performance will change outcomes. This technical process assumes that all schools have the same goals, a political process that advocates desirable outcomes for certain constituency groups, and an institutional process that can reproduce the class structure by justifying an "unfair social reward structure" (p. 371). In addition, Levin (1974) maintained that the accountability structure was not designed to address underlying concepts and is instead heavily grounded in the values and experiences of those in power. The hegemonic ideology at

the foundation of an accountability structure has plagued public education for decades (Koretz, 2017; McGuinn, 2016; Sahlberg, 2012). If this cycle continues, it seems imperative for educational researchers to conduct more empirical studies to explore how and why this toxic ideology builds barriers to equity in education. The tenets of an accountability framework allowed the researcher to interpret what existing literature suggests about accountability in education. Figure 3 illustrates the researcher's conceptualization of using an Accountability framework to view the toxic ideologies embedded within the education system.

Figure 3: *An Accountability Framework*
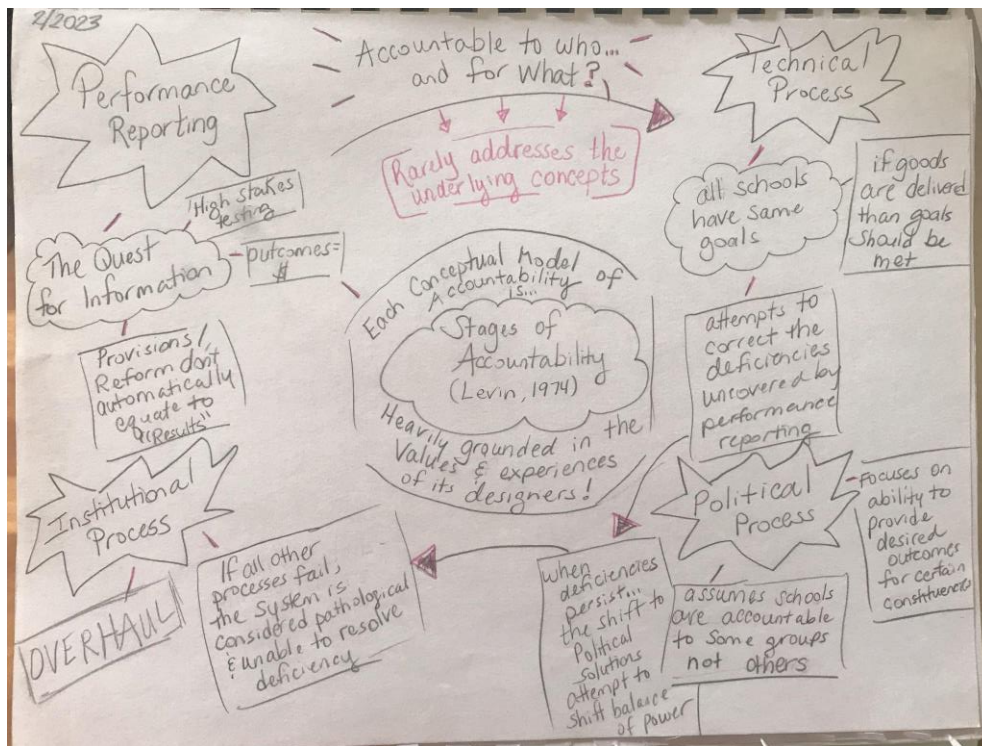
Note: The tenets of an accountability framework include four described processes: Performance reporting, Technical, Political, and Institutional (Levin, 1974)

Performance-Reporting as Structure of Accountability

Under the Title 1 amendment to ESEA (1965), President Johnson mandated districts to report the performance and achievement of English language learners (ELLs) as a stipulation for

funding. This outcomes-based, proof-of-result approach caused researchers to question how the mere act of performance would lead to positive change in schools (Debray, 2015; Levin, 1974). Researchers report that high-stakes standardized testing only perpetuates the restructuring of a social class system in which only the economically advantaged will benefit (Linn, 2003). In a 2023 National Education Policy Center Report (NEPC), Carey et al. (2023) outlined three primary shortcomings of current education policy on assessment and accountability, including a flawed theory of change. The NEPC report, Accountability 3.0, summarized the primary intentions of policies enacted through NCLB and ESSA, which maintained that school improvement would be inevitable if poorly performing schools are sanctioned for poor student performance on standardized tests. Educational stakeholders can argue that education policy demanding performance data in exchange for funding has not equated to positive outcomes like the results policymakers have promised and failed to deliver. After all, if they did, would there ever be a need for further policy reform bolstered with more empty promises?

Technical Process of an Accountability Structure

The technical process of an accountability structure in education assumes that all schools have the same goals (Levin, 1974). Thus, as past education policy dictates, if goods are delivered, then goals should be met (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Evidence of this technical process can be seen throughout education policy outlining incentive structures like merit pay, performance contracting, and tenure. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002), a policy amendment to ESEA enacted by President George Bush, monumentally increased the technical process structures of accountability. This federal policy amendment most notably mandated state and local education agencies to develop their own definition of a "highly qualified" teacher. This drove states to use data from high-stakes standardized tests to evaluate teacher performance.

When research began to surface suggesting the inadequacy of this policy mandate and its failure

to have any positive impact on student performance or growth, a new political regime under

President Barack Obama waited in the wings with yet a new policy reform, Race to the Top

(RTTT) (Race to the Top Act, 2011). This reform became known widely as a policy that

essentially tapped into a new level of competitive spirit that encouraged states to apply for grant

money. The federal government awarded points to states that enacted policies that instituted

performance-based teacher evaluations, adopted common core standards, turned around low-

performing schools, and built and used data collection systems. This technical accountability

structure attempted to correct the deficiencies uncovered by performance reporting, perpetuating

an unending cycle of failed policy reform.

Political Process as a Structure of Accountability

The political structure of accountability assumes that schools are accountable to some

groups but not others, a measure dependent upon the constituency (Levin, 1974). Race to the Top

Act (2011) instituted a business market logic by incentivizing or sanctioning school districts

based on unrealistic teacher and student accountability measures. Levin maintained that this

political structure of an accountability culture was rooted in bureaucratic solutions and attempted

to shift the balance of power. Additional research suggested that the political structures of RTTT

proved to be another failed attempt at promising a fair and accessible public education to all

(Hess & Eden, 2017). In response, President Obama proposed another amendment to the original

ESEA. Realizing that RTTT policy created an increasing power imbalance between federal and

state education agencies, President Obama enacted the ESSA (2015), which outlined new

measures to give states more power over regulating education. Sahlburg (2012) maintained that

this neoliberal restructuring of public education continued to have a significant impact on our institutions.

Institutional Process as a Structure of Accountability

When all other processes fail, Levin (1974) suggested that advocates of an institutional process believe a complete overhaul of the system is the only way to reform education. This process assumes that schools in positions of power design systems that reproduce the class hierarchy by sorting students into meaningless categories measured by irrelevant traits legitimizing unfair incentives. An institutional process maintains that when constituents who are part of the American education system do not align their goals with those of the political agenda, it becomes necessary to initiate a complete restructuring of the system by establishing measures of accountability and devising methods for holding students, teachers, and schools accountable for the failures created by the very system itself. President Ronald Regan addressed the nation with a commission, "A Nation at Risk," in 1983, which could be considered a monumental example of this institutional process. President Reagan painted a dire picture of the American education system and insisted that the only way to reform it was to restructure it completely. According to the 2023 NEPC report, the past several decades are characterized by a significant flaw in the unrelenting top-down approach to accountability in education that "promoted distrust among educators, stifled creativity, and limited the degree to which the system can evolve" (Carey et al., 2023, p.2). However, the institutional process of an accountability structure suggests that extreme accountability measures followed by enormously consequential actions would be the only way to ensure intended outcomes. For decades, the increasing structure of accountability continues to build barriers to equitable education. Unless researchers conduct

more empirical research and educational stakeholders find ways to question the status quo, this cycle will continue to perpetuate toxic outcomes.

Critical Leadership Theory

A critical leadership theoretical framework examines how assumptions, power, and inequity influence the understanding and experience of leadership roles (Dugan & Humbles, 2018). The conceptualization of leadership results from the environment, culture, and context in which educators are socially situated (Muhammad, 2017). Thus, the perception and knowledge of leadership can be directly related to one's social development. Dugan and Humbles stated, "Leadership development always begins by interrogating how the social system structures individual and group understandings of leadership" (p.15). According to the central tenets of critical leadership theory, influential leaders are essential as they examine and critique past and present social conditions, identify systems of oppression, and combat existing power struggles to empower others and incite social justice reform (Ylimaki, 2011). Critical leaders are also transformative as they leverage time and opportunity to incite change rather than impose control (Collinson, 2014). In addition, critical leaders are educative and self-reflective, and they envision alternate possibilities as mechanisms for dialogue (Dugan & Humbles, 2018). The last essential tenet of leadership theory maintains that a critical leader is ethical. They identify systems of oppression, empower those to take control of their lives, and incite social justice reform (Ylimaki, 2011). Leaders possess great power and considerable privilege, a recipe that can produce contradictory and ambiguous outcomes (Collinson, 2014). Figure 4 illustrates how a critical leadership framework can be used to view how power, privilege, and contradictory outcomes have historically collided with educational policy reform to produce systematic, top-down chaos in American education.

Figure 4*: Critical Leadership Theory*
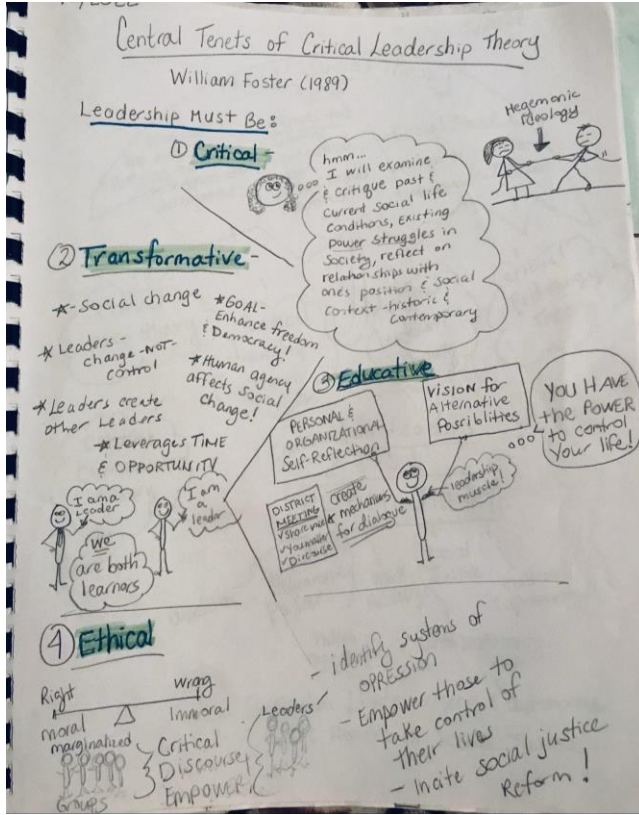
Note: The tenets of a Critical Leadership Framework describe effective leadership as critical,

transformative, educative, and ethical.

Neo-Institutional Theory

Dulude and Milley (2021) described neo-institutional theory as a theoretical framework used to understand how the structures of a political institution restrain the choices and actions of individuals who are part of the system. This framework was used during the interpretive analysis process to explore how the internal and external accountability demands contribute to how curriculum leaders select and evaluate curriculum. For example, at the organizational level, policy mandates have historically driven district demands for students to achieve proficient levels on high-stakes testing (No Child Left Behind, 2002). The consequences of falling short of this achievement often result in sanctions related to fund allocation. Furthermore, when

performance scores fall short of expectations, district control can be turned over to government or private agencies (Hayes, 2008). Dulude and Milley (2021) argued that to better understand the choices made by educational leaders, they must be examined within the context of the institutional complexities in which they operate. Therefore, the tenets of a neo-institutional framework allowed the researcher to view the restraints on the choices and actions of individuals who are part of a more extensive institutional system. Figure 5 illustrates how the researcher used a critical leadership framework to view curriculum leaders as individuals in this larger political arena who must navigate the challenges of organizational accountability when making decisions about literacy curricula. However, research needs to adequately address their lived experience.

Figure 5: *Institutional Structures of Neo-Institutional Theory*
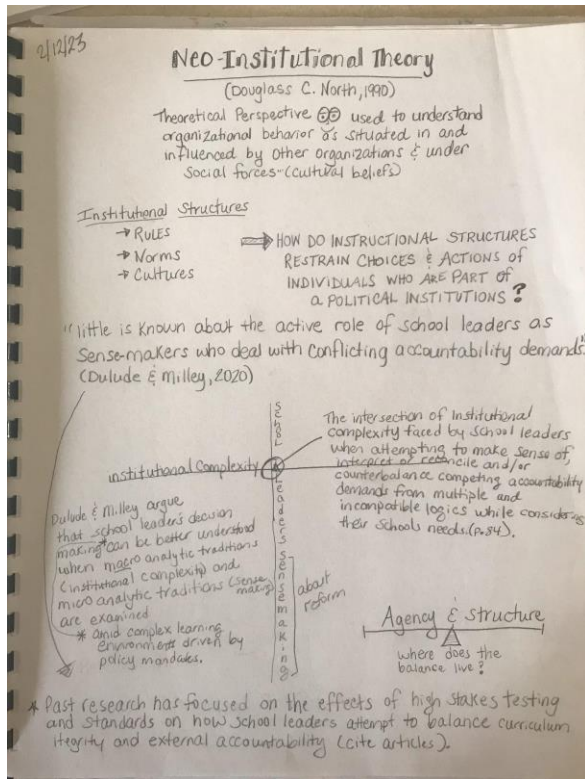
Note: This framework allowed the researcher to view how institutional structures restrain the choices and actions of curriculum leaders.

THE TOXIC CYCLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION

Those who question whether policy intentions and measured outcomes align might consider how a toxic ideology like GERM lays the foundation for any proposed education mandate. As new political regimes enter the political arena and new policy initiatives are enacted, stricter mandates make it increasingly more work for districts to maintain instructional integrity while achieving organizational legitimacy and complying with rapidly changing mandates (Spillane & Kenney, 2012). Additionally, it is imperative to understand how historic policy reform, driven by GERM, has influenced shifts in literacy curriculum selection and implementation.

A TIMELINE OF FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY IN AMERICA

Elementary and Secondary Act

The ESEA (ESEA, 1965), often a historic and momentous federal education policy, was enacted by President Lyndon B. Johnson and intended to address the inequities created by the American education system impacting historically marginalized, underprivileged minority communities. Less than ten years after the enactment of ESEA, the original policy was amended under Title 1 to include accountability measures mandating local and state education agencies to be held responsible for annual yearly progress (AYP) in the form of language proficiency and grade level expectations. Beginning in the early 1970's, student proficiency and achievement were measured against annual development objectives as a stipulation of funding. Schools unable to provide data to support such achievements would be sanctioned and funds denied.

"A Nation at Risk"

One decade after this latest mandate, President Ronald Reagan released a commission on excellence, "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which suggested that unless the education system was reoriented entirely and an increase in academic standards was not authorized, the security of all Americans would be severely compromised. Thus, in the two decades following the enactment of ESEA, originally intended to address gaps in learning for students who were non-native English speakers, federal policymakers stripped state and local agencies of autonomy (Koretz, 2017). This outcome-based era and deficit approach to public education painted a clear picture of a global movement toward greater accountability. The decade that followed and up to the turn of the century was characterized by increased multimedia, broadband networks, and awareness of the need to learn to deliver instruction via electronic means. President Reagan's address to Congress painted a bleak picture of public education, and it loomed over the heads of policymakers, educators, and parents. Parents began questioning the public school system's integrity, leading to more alternative school options like charter and homeschooling.

No Child Left Behind Act

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed a reformation to the ESEA legislation, known as the NCLB (NCLB, 2002). This reform dramatically increased the federal government's role by imposing national mandates like performance reporting, fund distribution, teacher accountability, and standardized testing. NCLB requires states to provide highly qualified teachers; a definition is left to states to decide. Each state was mandated to set one high, challenging student standard, which had to apply to all students. The increased focus on standards and accountability sparked international policy developments and debate. In the political arena, democrats appealed for

more school funding while Republicans pushed back on the increased role of government. Proponents of NCLB believed that high standards and goals helped students and teachers perform at higher levels. They also thought that NCLB established a foundation for schools to involve parents, improve administration, and drive curriculum and instruction through assessment data. Conversely, opponents of NCLB argued that sanctions punish and hurt schools and ultimately do not positively impact school improvement. Additionally, they believed that tying test scores to teacher salaries and reducing funding if AYA were not met would likely hamper a school's ability to improve (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). Not only did opponents believe that NCLB reduced effective instruction and student learning, but it also encouraged teachers to employ a teach-to-the-test mentality that ultimately built barriers and memorialized accountability, a consequence that could still be witnessed today.

Under NCLB, schools not meeting minimum AYP standards were labeled as needing improvement and given two years to develop and submit an improvement plan. An even more telling sign that marginalized student populations received harsher sanctions and caused the achievement gap to grow was the option for high-performing students attending low-performing districts to transfer to schools of their choice. In addition, schools that missed the mark on expected AYP after four years were labeled as requiring corrective action, which included an overhaul of staffing, introduction to mandated curriculum, and extended student-teacher contact time. Schools that failed to meet expected federal standards on their AYP felt the most severe sanction. Failing schools were completely restructured into charter schools or subjected to a complete takeover by the state. Sahlburg (2012) maintained that this neoliberal restructuring of public education significantly impacts our institutions.

Research also shows concerns over ethical issues concerning standardized test performance reporting during the implementation of NCLB. Since NCLB did not take full effect until 2003, critics question how reported scores increased as a supposed result of NCLB implementation between 2000-2005 and could not have been attributed to policy that had not yet gone into effect. Further skepticism was on the rise after critics questioned if states reported scores from all subgroups or if scores were cherry-picked, the act of choosing specific evidence and suppressing others. Iannacci (2018) referred to policies like NCLB as those that create a culture of skepticism that limits a school leader's autonomy to be innovative and creative and prevents marginalized subgroup populations from getting an equitable education.

Race to the Top

Following a decade of NCLB reform, President Obama took office and raised the accountability bar by restructuring this policy and calling it by a different name, RTTT (Race to the Top Act, 2011). President Obama proposed that a $4.3 billion U.S. Department of Education grant be used to reward innovation and reform in state and local k-12 schools. This well-intentioned federal policy was designed to, in President Obama's words, "give everyone the best education possible - from the day they start preschool to the day they start their career," and he claimed RTTT was the path for America to lead in the 21st century (Race to the Top Act, 2011). Ultimately, RTTT was sold to American citizens as one that would raise standards and align policies to prepare students for college and career readiness while helping states to pursue higher standards, improve teacher effectiveness, use data to drive instruction, and adopt strategies to help underperforming schools.

Unfortunately, the literature describes RTTT as a policy that drastically increased the already top-down control over the nation's schools and further stripped away what little

autonomy individual states still believed to have. RTTT was credited with a record increase in federal policy adoption and reform (Motoko, 2014). For states to receive funding, they were required to compete for grant money. The federal government would award points to states that enacted policies that instituted performance-based teacher evaluations, adopted common core standards, turned around low-performing schools, and built and used data collection systems. In addition, states were incentivized to get buy-in from district and teacher unions. District curriculum leaders instructed teachers to use the curriculum like a script in hopes that it might help students improve test performance (El Moussaoui, 2017). Koretz (2017) stated,

> Test-based accountability has become an end in American education, unmoored from
> clear thinking about what should be measured, how it should be measured, or how testing
> can fit into a rational plan for evaluating and improving our schools. (p. 5)

Parents and teachers argued that standardized tests were ineffective at measuring student performance and teacher effectiveness, which ultimately sparked debate about the policies' intentions. Debray (2015) described this overreliance on standardized testing as the precursor to the "opt-out" movement in which parents refused to allow schools to test their children. States that enforced this approach reinstated an antiquated system for allocating federal funds that civil rights organizations fought relentlessly to remove in 1965.

Every School Succeeds Act

When RTTT policies failed to meet their outlined intentions and lost momentum in public education, President Obama signed the ESSA in 2015 (ESSA, 2015), replacing or modifying NCLB and its provisions and reinstating ESEA. The primary intention outlined in this policy mirrors that of ESEA: to prepare all students, regardless of race, income, ability, ethnicity, or English Language Proficiency (ELP), for a successful and fulfilling college and career

experience. Most significantly, ESSA gave more decision-making power back to the states to determine student standards. States were required to submit goals and standards and a plan for achievement growth to the U.S. Department of Education. Standardized tests would be given to students in grades 3rd-8th and 11th and 12th. The results of standardized tests would measure student capabilities and state success. Sanctions and incentives would be left to the discretion of the states. For states to remain compliant, each had to develop a multiple-accountability system using four indicators: achievement/growth in ELA and mathematics, ELP, elementary and middle school academic measures of growth, and high school graduation rates. All four indicators of accountability were required to be used with all students. Even students with the most challenging learning disabilities and those who received individualized support under special education laws were needed to take and pass the same standardized tests. Koretz (2017) stated that national standards like "to prepare children for citizenship," "to cultivate a skilled workforce," "to teach cultural literacy," "to prepare students for college," "to help students become critical thinkers," and "to help students compete in a global marketplace" perpetuated the notion that an increase in test performance equated to an in-depth understanding of the overall curriculum. Koretz maintained that this issue was simple and could be boiled down to a simple notion: "High-stakes testing creates strong incentives to focus on the tested sample rather than the domain it is intended to represent" (p. 18). Despite intentions to turn decision-making power over to state and local agencies, the federal government continues to possess the ultimate power by requiring rigorous score reporting standards in exchange for funding.

CURRICULUM

According to Ball (2008), Americans best understand that curriculum is a body of knowledge that can be learned to become productive members of society. Ball argued that

curriculum is what links the person to society and culture. The connection between curriculum and instructional leaders is vague and weak because of the historical tendency to define curriculum as an academic subject separate from pedagogical practice (Chan et al., 2022). Reform efforts have historically proposed changes that claim to be for the social good, but the failure of policy reform in America has been documented by researchers for decades (Lynch et al., 2009). The NEPC report (2023), a panel composed of dozens of scholars, recommended reforming current policy that prioritizes equity and effectiveness in the accountability system. The priority states: "Align assessment policy with goals for high-quality curricula and instruction" (NEPC, 2023, p. 1). Curriculum is the conduit for implementing ideas and is the central focus of American education, a system in a constant state of perpetual reform driven by political agenda.

The Influence of Policy Reform on Shifts in Literacy Curriculum

Institutional policy shifts can significantly impact literacy curriculum selection in public schools in various ways. According to Shanahan (2014), policy shifts often introduce new literacy education standards and guidelines, causing districts to find ways to adjust their curriculum to align with these standards. In addition, policy shifts may prioritize evidence-based practices in literacy instruction and require schools to adopt programs and materials proven effective through research, influencing curriculum selection decisions. According to Hardman and Dawson (2008), changes in funding priorities at the institutional level often create budget constraints that force schools to adjust to the availability of resources for literacy curriculum, causing curriculum leaders to prioritize programs or materials that influence curriculum selection and implementation.

Policy reform often includes changes to assessment practices and accountability measures in literacy education. Curriculum leaders may need to select curriculum materials that align with the assessment framework and support students' performance on standardized tests (Cassidy & Ortlieb, 2013). Institutional policies like ESSA (1969) emphasize the importance of inclusive and equitable literacy instruction, which requires curriculum leaders to evaluate materials that represent diverse perspectives and meet the needs of all learners, influencing the selection process (Hess & Eden, 2017). Institutional policy reform mandating technology integration in literacy instruction (Hayes, 2008) can require curriculum leaders to select curriculum materials that incorporate digital resources and support technology-enhanced learning experiences for students. While policy shifts may provide guidelines and expectations for literacy curriculum, curriculum leaders may exercise local control, giving them flexibility and autonomy in curriculum selection.

Educational Leadership

Research suggests that local school organizations that share decision-making with all community stakeholders can better identify critical issues, collaborate to find solutions, and identify influential leaders (Avelar La Salle & Johnson, 2019; Maxfield & Klockco, 2010). Further, educational leadership in an equitable system is described as one in which all stakeholders embrace a new paradigm, communicate and empower each other, and continuously work toward a shared vision (Aguas, 2020; Crawford et al., 1997; Daniels, 2004; Dugan & Humbles, 2018). To manage an effective education system, Wallace and Hoyle (2005) argued that leaders must be willing to shift away from a radical transformation ideology intended to reform policy toward a systematic approach where social justice prevails.

Educational Leaders in NYS

According to the NYS Office of Teaching Initiatives, the key responsibilities of a school district leader (SDL) could be more specific and clear. The only key responsibility listed concerning curriculum states: "Responsibility for curriculum development and supervision of its implementation" (NYS Department of Education, 2023, para. 1). Ylimaki (2011) stated that educational leaders who work in an era of high-stakes accountability must have "curriculum content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical expertise" (p. 26). However, no certification requirements specific to curriculum and instruction are mandated to be certified as an SDL in NYS.

Although most public school districts across Long Island employ some variation of a district-level curriculum leader, the responsibilities related to curriculum and instruction are left to the discretion of each district. While some may describe the role and responsibilities of a curriculum leader as one who selects and evaluates curriculum, an SDL is also tasked with a multitude and variance of other responsibilities. Since the NYSED Office of Teaching Initiatives gives decision-making power to districts to hire SDLs to select and implement curriculum, the role and responsibilities of such administrators vary from district to district. One common characteristic among SDLs, regardless of their specific title and job description, is the direct connection between the mission of the school district and NYS teaching and learning standards outlining federal policy-related performance and achievement expectations. Spillane and Kenney (2012) defined this as balancing instructional integrity with organizational legitimacy. Ylimaki (2011) described the challenges of a curriculum leader as the barriers created by a political era consumed with race-based, class-based achievement gaps. The ambiguity of the critical

responsibilities of a curriculum leader in NYS is problematic and exacerbated by the ambiguity of how the curriculum is understood and defined in policy and practice.

CONCLUSION

As this comprehensive literature review illustrates, the increasing accountability structure evident from the timeline of federal education policy reform in this country demonstrates a toxic cycle that prevents districts from achieving the intended level of equity outlined in every federal policy since the mid-twentieth century. Carey et al. (2023) stated that the most fundamental issue regarding structural accountability is access to equitable education. They suggested that it is imperative to question how current accountability structures prevent equitable outcomes from addressing systemic inequalities affecting racially, economically, and multilingual underserved students. In a recent proposal, Educational Accountability 3.0, a team of scholars outlined principles for adequate and equitable assessment and accountability. Among the principles, Carey et al. (2023) stated, "While the system holds schools accountable for the education of students, it should correspondingly hold elected officials and other leaders accountable for providing schools with what they need to succeed" (p. 6). This principle suggests that educational leaders in a larger political arena may significantly influence a much-needed shift in accountability.

This phenomenological research study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of how elementary-level literacy curriculum leaders in Long Island, New York, perceive their roles, grapple with structures of accountability created by a perpetual cycle of policy reform, and navigate those challenges when selecting and evaluating curriculum. Seidman (2019) stated that of all the abundant research on critical issues in education, minimal empirical studies explore educational stakeholders' perceptions and life experiences. The most current research suggests

the need for meaningful policy reform to balance an accountability system and reflect the importance of stakeholder involvement in creating a system that will evolve and improve (Carey et al., 2023). This study adds valuable descriptions of curriculum leaders' shared experiences to stimulate discourse about how agency and autonomy can drive a more democratic restructuring of American education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology focuses on meaning-making through ontology (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Using this constructivist approach, the researcher inquires about how understanding our states of being shows up in the world through our lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A hermeneutic phenomenological study begins with a descriptive idea of the phenomenon. Through the inquiry process, the researcher can assume a connection to the social situation to drive a critical interpretation (Bhattacharya, 2017). To gain an in-depth understanding of how curriculum leaders perceive their role and navigate structures of accountability when selecting and evaluating curriculum, the researcher established a connection to the social situation while actively listening to interpret themes that developed. Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology was the most appropriate method for this study. Additionally, a fusion approach to data collection and analysis allowed the researcher to acquire knowledge and demonstrate in-depth understandings that emerged from a transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The fusion approach addresses the value of the descriptive and interpretive process to "bring to light both the knowledge of the phenomenon under study and the meaning of this knowledge for the researcher and the research participants" (Aguas, 2022, p.3).

PROBLEM

A literature review revealed a toxic cycle of failing education policy reform spanning more than 60 years in the United States. In a recent National Education Policy Center report, a team of scholars outlined a reform plan for the ESEA (1965) policy that demands a more effective and equitable approach to accountability. In part, the plan outlines the need to align equitable assessment mandates with goals for high-quality curriculum and instruction (Carey et al., 2023), an intention outlined by President Johnson in the original ESEA policy (ESEA, 1965)

but has yet to be achieved. Similarly, Spillane and Kenney (2012) discussed this dilemma often

faced by educators when trying to balance instructional integrity and organizational legitimacy,

especially when required to use systems that were put in place by those who claim to be well-

intentioned but are in stark contrast to actual outcomes. Since the enactment of ESEA in 1965,

eight proposed amendments to the policy have been instituted. Each amendment is characterized

by increased structural accountability measures, particularly emphasizing a relentless cycle of

standardized test achievement through performance reporting mandates. This perpetual reform

cycle has caused leaders to put more emphasis on test-based outcomes and less on noncognitive

skills, equitable outcomes for all, and essential socio-emotional facets of schooling (Lynch et al.,

2009). Ultimately, the equitable intentions outlined in past education policy reform have been

overshadowed by the toxic ideology (GERM) that drives actual policy implementation.

The discrepancies between policy intention and actual outcomes have been recorded in

the literature reviewed and suggest beneficial outcomes for students in White privileged

communities and harmful consequences for students in underprivileged and underserved Black

and Hispanic communities (Meier & Wood, 2004; Peterson & West, 2003). It is undeniably

indicative from the research reviewed that those in positions of power perpetuate a hegemonic

social hierarchy through education policy reform that incentivizes some and sanctions others.

However, it is problematic that a limited number of empirical studies have been done to explore

the lived experience of educational stakeholders like school and district curriculum leaders

tasked with selecting and implementing literacy curricula while maintaining compliance with

policy mandates. The outcomes of this problematic cycle can be better understood by exploring

the lived experiences of literacy curriculum leaders across demographically diverse districts.

PURPOSE

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed to add a new layer of understanding to the limited empirical research that explores the lived experiences of district-level literacy curriculum leaders responsible for selecting and implementing curricula. The current study examined how curriculum leaders perceive their roles and navigate the challenges of an accountability structure while maintaining compliance with federal policy mandates. Since an abundant body of literature supports the outcomes of more than six decades of ineffective policy reform (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016; Horsford et al., 2019), it is imperative to explore the perceptions of education stakeholders whose responsibilities are directly influenced by policy reform. Findings from this study offer stakeholders a new perspective on how equitable policy reform can deliver intended outcomes. Additionally, empirical research that advances this understanding drives the need for equitable reform and incentivizes all stakeholders to participate actively. Consequently, when more constituency groups have a seat around the policy reform table, it is less likely that decisions concerning access to equitable education will be left to those employing a toxic cycle of accountability. Ultimately, the proposed study raises awareness of the need for a balance of power in education.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Hermeneutic phenomenology has historical roots in biblical text analysis. As this method evolved, the study of texts expanded to include human practices, events, and social situations to create new understandings through language and social interactions (Crotty & Preissle, 2000). Hermeneutic phenomenology is one of three types of phenomenological research designs. While transcendental phenomenology focuses on understanding how knowledge and meaning are constructed from a positivist perspective (Husserl, 1931), hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to

develop a deeper interpretive understanding of lived experiences through inquiry and dialogue

from a constructivist perspective (Heidegger, 1982). In addition, hermeneutic phenomenology

creates opportunities for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of others' experiences,

shared experiences, and by extension - our own. Since hermeneutics assumes a connection

between the researcher and the social situation, the researcher must be an active listener to drive

interpretations that amplify in-depth understandings of the phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2017).

While phenomenologists are expected to bracket their personal experiences to develop an

authentic understanding of participant perspectives, research also suggests that to avoid the

challenges and resulting limitations, the researcher should purposefully introduce their own

experiences or understandings into the study (Aguas, 2022; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Husserl

& Kersten, 1983). By presenting personal experiences purposefully, the researcher can create

meaningful connections and interpretations during data analysis. Phillips-Pula et al. (2011)

described the relationship between the researcher and participants as intimate and personal to

guarantee in-depth, rich data. As qualitative research requires the researcher to be the primary

agent of data collection, it is essential to establish this relationship.

Critical Social Constructivist Worldview

Social constructivism is an interpretive framework grounded in ontological assumptions

relying on participant views to inductively generate themes and meaning (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Social constructivist researchers use an open-ended method of questioning to allow

participants to construct meaning. In addition, researchers with a social constructivist worldview

allow their own experiences and backgrounds to guide their interpretation of findings

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Like a social constructivist approach, researchers with a critical

constructivist worldview believe that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed.

However, critical constructivists maintain that phenomena can be best understood by critically

thinking about the connection between culture, institutions, and historical contexts (Kincheloe,

2005). By engaging in critical discourse that seeks to construct deeper meaning about the

influences of socio-historic dynamics, social constructivists aim to question the imbalance of

power and incite social justice change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Illustrated in Figure 6, a critical

social constructivist worldview aligns with this qualitative research study because the researcher

aimed to understand literacy curriculum leaders' perceptions of how organizational

accountability influences their roles in navigating these structures in their decisions about

literacy curricula.

Figure 6*: Critical Social Theory*
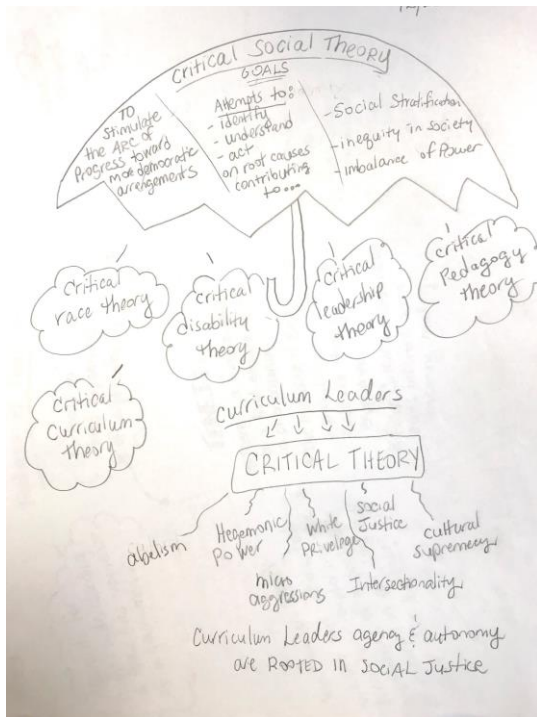
Note: Critical theories attempt to identify, understand, and act on root causes contributing to

inequity.

The Role of the Researcher

For the past 26 years, I have served as an elementary educator in the public school system in Long Island, New York. I have experienced the frequent initiation of curriculum reform and its alignment with institutional education policy reform. As a transformative educator, I have been involved in many opportunities to explore new curricula and pedagogical practices. Specifically, in my experience as a classroom teacher, I often wonder how the district curriculum leader balances curriculum mandates driven by accountability structures while aligning the district's mission. Besides my role as an educator, I am a certified reading specialist K-12, nationally certified in literacy (ages 3-11), and a certified special education teacher K-12. Although I do not serve in a curriculum leadership capacity, nor am I responsible for selecting and evaluating curriculum, as institutional education policy undergoes drastic shifts that demand changes in pedagogical practice, the need to choose and assess curriculum is imperative in understanding a curriculum leader's life experience. Thus, I am motivated to understand how curriculum leaders perceive their role and how they navigate the challenges of an accountability structure when making decisions about literacy curricula.

SITE SELECTION AND SAMPLE

Participants

Participants were chosen using a purposeful criterion sampling strategy. This sampling technique ensured that all participants had experience selecting and evaluating elementary literacy curricula while navigating accountability structures and maintaining compliance with federal policy mandates. Further, the researcher used purposeful criterion sampling to encourage curriculum leaders from demographically diverse school districts to participate. To attain trustworthiness, each participant met the same criteria, including fulfilling the role of an ELA

curriculum leader in a public school district in Long Island, New York. Despite their various titles, participants also met the criteria for serving as an elementary or district-level literacy curriculum leader. Titles included "Curriculum Supervisor," "Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction," or "Elementary Literacy Curriculum Director." Participants met the criteria for district- or elementary-level literacy curriculum leaders if their role was to select and evaluate literacy curricula. In addition, participants served as elementary or district-level leaders for at least one year. Seven curriculum leaders participated in this study to explore how they perceive their role and navigate the challenges of an accountability structure when selecting and evaluating literacy curricula. All seven participants met in person with the researcher on-site at their district office. The focus group met virtually due to participant availability.

The researcher used enrollment data from the NYS Department of Education (2020-2021) to purposefully select participants in three categories representing diverse demographics: The first category included districts with a predominantly White K-5 enrollment located in economically advantaged communities. To be considered a district in this category, enrollment of the White student population was 70% or more, and 20% or less considered economically disadvantaged. The second category included districts with racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse student enrollment. To be considered a district in this category, 40-69% of the students enrolled were White, and 20-30% of the population was considered economically disadvantaged. The last category included districts with less than 40% of the students enrolled that were White, whose student majority is Black or Hispanic, and had more than 30% from economically disadvantaged households. Two of the seven participants were curriculum leaders from districts in Suffolk County that met the requirements of the first category. Another two participants were curriculum leaders from districts in Nassau County who met the requirements

of the second category, and three were curriculum leaders from both Nassau and Suffolk counties who met the requirements of the third category. Ultimately, the researcher obtained participants across Long Island representing demographically diverse districts.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The four phases of data collection were inspired by Seidman's (2019) structure for in-depth phenomenological interviewing and Aguas' (2022) in-depth fusion approach for data collection and analysis. Since this phenomenological research study focused on the lived experience of literacy curriculum leaders as they described and made sense of their role as well as how they described the challenges of organizational accountability when deciding about literacy curriculum, the researcher used multiple methods and triangulation which was a critical component of data collection procedures (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Data collection sources included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant/researcher journals.

Aguas (2022) suggested seven components during data analysis to illustrate how a fusion between transcendental descriptions and hermeneutic interpretations intersect and provide methods for a new layer of data collection and analysis, as illustrated in Figure 7. Aguas (2022) explained the components to include emphasis (knowledge and understanding), researcher and object of the study (nature of the relationship), intentionality, consciousness, and intentionality (intuition is a primary source of knowledge mediated by description and interpretation), radical autonomy and situated meaning (possibility of generating understanding and new meaning based on participants' relationship with culture and environment), constitutionality and co-constitutionality (the dialogical relationship between researcher and participants), cognitive and noncognitive meaning (the type of language the researcher uses to describe and interpret), and

rigor of researcher (the kind of data collection and analysis employed by the researcher to ensure trustworthiness). The application of these components in this study is summarized in Table 3 (Appendix A) and described in the phases of data analysis.

Figure 7: *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*
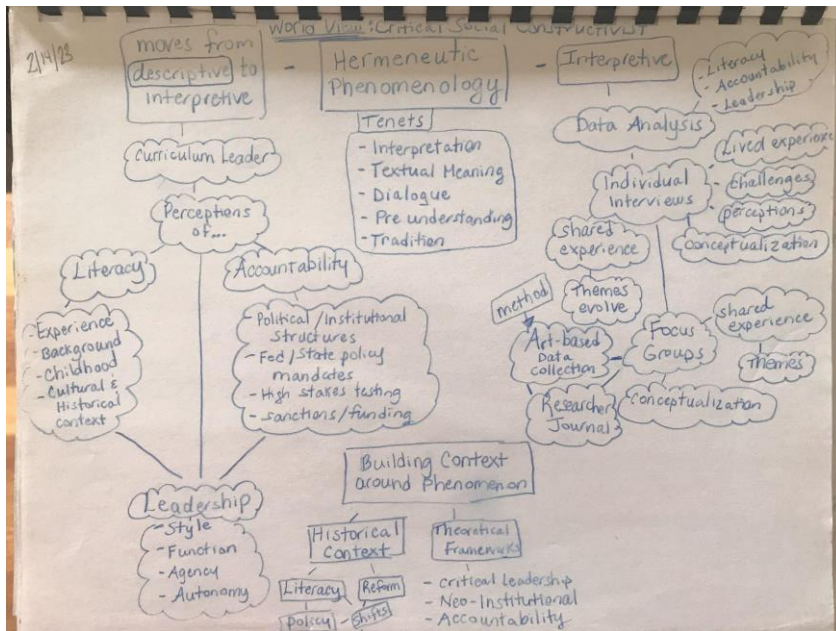
Note: The researcher mapped out the application of this design in the current study.

Phase I: Questionnaire

The first phase of data collection was initiated after all participants returned consent. The questionnaire was designed on Google Forms to collect descriptive profile and demographic data from the participants, including their leadership titles and years of experience as ELA curriculum leaders. The questionnaire included a few open-ended questions to elicit responses, asking each participant to describe their curriculum leader roles. When participants submitted completed questionnaires, the researcher was automatically notified via email. The researcher used questionnaire responses to develop a semi-structured interview guide. A follow-up phone call

and email were made to schedule virtual or on-site individual interviews. Individual interviews took place within two weeks of the completion of the questionnaires.

Additionally, after receiving the questionnaires, the researcher mailed a handmade journal, a collection of blank paper between two laminated covers, to each participant with a detailed description of its intentions and four solicited prompts. Participants were asked to bring journals to the individual interview and the subsequent focus group in phase III of data collection. The solicited journal prompts were short, simple word phrases, including "curriculum leader role," "curriculum selection process," "influence of federal/state mandates," or "curriculum leader challenges." Specific instructions invited participants to use their prompt to generate thoughts, ideas, feelings, words, or sketches that can be organized on the pages of their journals in any way they choose. Since research suggests that journalists should never feel influenced by how entries should be kept or organized (Gregory, 2008; Morrell-Scott, 2018; Stone et al., 2003), participants were invited to record their journal responses in any way they feel comfortable or make sense to them.

Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews provided opportunities for the researcher to develop meaning and understanding by inviting participants to describe their lived experience as a curriculum leader and how, if at all, navigating organizational accountability when selecting and evaluating curriculum is challenging (Morrell-Scott, 2018). Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for the researcher to obtain data from any topics discussed by the participant (Seidman, 2019). Interviews were conducted in the second phase of data collection, and all 7 took place within two weeks of each other.

Six of the seven interviews took place on-site at the participant's district office, and the seventh occurred virtually due to weather and travel constraints. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and followed the semi-structured interview protocol in Table 4 (Appendix A). The researcher began the interview by explaining that the format is casual and conversational, and participants can decide when to discontinue the interview. Rapport was established during the initial questioning by having the researcher and participant exchange brief descriptions of personal information like family or general work experience. The researcher had a set of guiding questions prepared that also considered the previously generated questions from the review and examination of the participant's completed questionnaire. Before ending the interview, the researcher reminded participants that a session recording would be uploaded as a transcript and available for feedback in the last phase of data collection to ensure that information represents their experiences. In addition, participants were reminded to bring their solicited journal entries to the focus group.

Phase III: Focus Group

Focus groups are used as a qualitative data collection tool that can provide rich data on shared experiences while also allowing for the potential of a subset of participants to represent the more prominent, diverse population (Gill et al., 2008). A single-purpose focus group design allows for a subset of participants from a larger population to represent different strata of the same population (Billups, 2021). Participants described their personal lived experiences as curriculum leaders who navigate the challenges of organizational accountability when making curriculum decisions and using a researcher's journal to record notes during discussion allowed for generating analytic memos after the first read of raw data. Emerging themes from their shared experiences provided the researcher with opportunities to interpret data inductively.

The focus group was selected according to participant consent and availability. Protocols for the focus group are outlined in Appendix A. The focus group occurred virtually within two weeks of the last participant interview. The focus group session lasted approximately one hour. After a brief reintroduction to participants, the researcher allowed each participant to introduce themselves to each other. The researcher informed participants that the focus group discussion would be recorded and explained the intended casual format. The researcher also reviewed the intention of the previously solicited journal activity and invited participants to share their entries in any way they felt comfortable throughout the group discussion. The researcher prompted participants to turn to their journal entries on a specific solicited prompt to refer to during the debate.

While participants initially shared their responses to the solicited journal entries, the researcher facilitated a more in-depth discussion after displaying a "word cloud" previously generated based on individual interview responses. The word cloud provided a visual representation in a word cloud format that illustrated shared responses to questions during interviews. Participants were then asked to share any interpretations depicting the shared responses while the researcher continued facilitating discussion and recording notes in the researcher's journal. This additional data collection layer applies component 5, constitutionality and co-constitutionality, in Aguas' (2022) fusion approach and demonstrates a blend between the researcher's use of bracketing and the participants' understandings to build knowledge based on co-creation. The focus group recording was uploaded as a transcript and made available for feedback in the last data collection phase to ensure information represents participant experiences.

Phase IV: Member Check Questionnaire

The last phase of the data collection process allowed participants to act as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge and understanding. At the same time, the researcher avoided a biasing effect on participant views implicit in their shared experience (Aguas, 2022). Member checking is one of several qualitative research strategies used to validate and evaluate the trustworthiness of the storyteller (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). Transcripts from individual interviews and focus group discussions were shared, and participant feedback ensured that recordings were accurate and representative of their shared experiences. Feedback from participants was solicited to ensure that notes and transcripts accurately depict participants' experiences and intended meaning.

DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

Seven themes across a fusion approach described by Aguas (2022) are outlined and applied to the current study. Table 2 (Appendix A) summarizes these seven components and how the researcher applied them in the current study. A fusion approach is an iterative process in which the researcher combines transcendental epistemology (Moustakas, 1994) and hermeneutic methodology (Van Manen, 1990) to arrive at meaning, understanding, and interpretation. Aguas (2022) suggested that the fusion of phenomenological knowledge and a sense of the essence of experience "emerges from the blend of positivist and interpretivist epistemological assumptions, objective and subjective perspectives, and etic and emic methodological perspectives" (p. 4). The integration of transcendental epistemology and hermeneutic methodology, as outlined by Aguas, enriches the current study by providing a nuanced understanding through a fusion approach that combines various perspectives and methodological frameworks.

Component 1: Emphasis

Emphasis is the merging of universal truths and the fore-structure of understanding central to actual and deep knowledge. In the current study, the researcher achieved this by using a reflective journal to record and describe universal truths about the phenomenon's essence. The researcher used these descriptions to interpret the lived experience of curriculum leaders in the interpretative analysis stage. This non-linear data analysis approach focused on the phenomenon. It allowed the researcher to bracket preconceptions during interviews while authentically reflecting on each stage of the data collection process using journal entries.

Component 2: Researcher and Object of the Study

The duality between participants and researcher is cardinal as the researcher used bracketing to minimize bias while sustaining how the participant interprets their experience of the phenomenon being studied. In the current study, a focus group was conducted to facilitate an understanding of curriculum leaders' lived experiences and promote discussion of diverse perspectives between the researcher and participants. The researcher invited participants to engage in solicited reflective journaling. The researcher was an active and neutral participant.

Component 3: Intentionality, Consciousness, and Intuition

The researcher's and the participant's contribution to knowledge acquisition was sought to balance description and interpretation. This is an integral step to maintaining epistemological and methodological neutrality. In the current study, the researcher adhered to a semi-structured interview protocol. After interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researcher used an initial coding process via the first read of raw data followed by a second cycle of In Vivo coding to analyze participants' exact words. The researcher used observations of participants' facial expressions, tone of voice, and hesitation at the time quotations were recorded. Since In Vivo

coding is a data analysis procedure using participants' exact words, analyzing researcher observations allowed the researcher to develop further interpretations and emergent theories.

Component 4: Radical Autonomy and Situated Meaning

There is a negotiated approach toward addressing the phenomenon being studied between researcher autonomy and an openness to change. This approach is entangled in producing actual and more profound knowledge. The sources selected in the data collection phases of the current study were chosen to elicit detailed phenomenological descriptions of curriculum leaders' lived experiences while providing opportunities in the data analysis phase for the researcher and participants to reflect and interpret data. Particularly paramount in this component of the fusion approach is the autonomous nature of reflective journaling used by the researcher and participants.

Component 5: Constitutionality and Co-Constitutionality

A blend between the researcher's use of bracketing and the participants' fore-structure understanding was considered to build knowledge based on co-creation. However, the researcher avoided a biasing effect on the participants' views implicit in their narratives. In phase IV of the data collection process of this study, the researcher elicited participant feedback. Raw data from interviews, the focus group, and reflective journals were shared with participants, and feedback or clarification was interwoven with the authenticity of researcher insights from reflective journaling while ensuring trustworthiness by bracketing.

Component 6: Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Meaning

Fusing the natural reality and the transcendental attitude occurs in describing and interpreting the phenomenon under study using representational and subjective language such as evocative, expressive, and transcendental descriptions. Emerging themes, pre-understandings of

both the researcher and the participants using data from interviews, the focus group, and reflexive journaling, and descriptions of eidetic structures (essential components of the phenomenon) are entangled to allow the researcher to code emergent themes about curriculum leaders' lived experience inductively.

Component 7: Rigor of Research

A clear definition of scientific rigor and contextual criteria ensure the description of universal essences and the trustworthiness of co-created interpretations. The current study used an iterative analysis to apply this component from the fusion approach. The researcher provided a description and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied, how curriculum leaders perceive their leadership role, and how they describe the influence of organizational accountability in navigating these structures when deciding about a literacy curriculum.

This approach allowed the researcher to use an epistemological analysis of the phenomenon and move toward interpreting the essence of the shared curriculum leaders' experience in navigating organizational accountability when selecting and evaluating literacy curricula. To maintain epistemological neutrality and ensure trustworthiness and authenticity, the researcher linked transcendental descriptions and hermeneutic interpretations using a continuous reflective process moderated by a researcher and participant reflective journal. The simultaneous descriptive and interpretive analysis process was achieved without compromising the original concepts using the seven core data collection and analysis components. Figure 8 illustrates the researcher's conceptualization of how transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology fuse to create an additional layer of interpretation.

Figure 8*: A Fusion Approach Map*
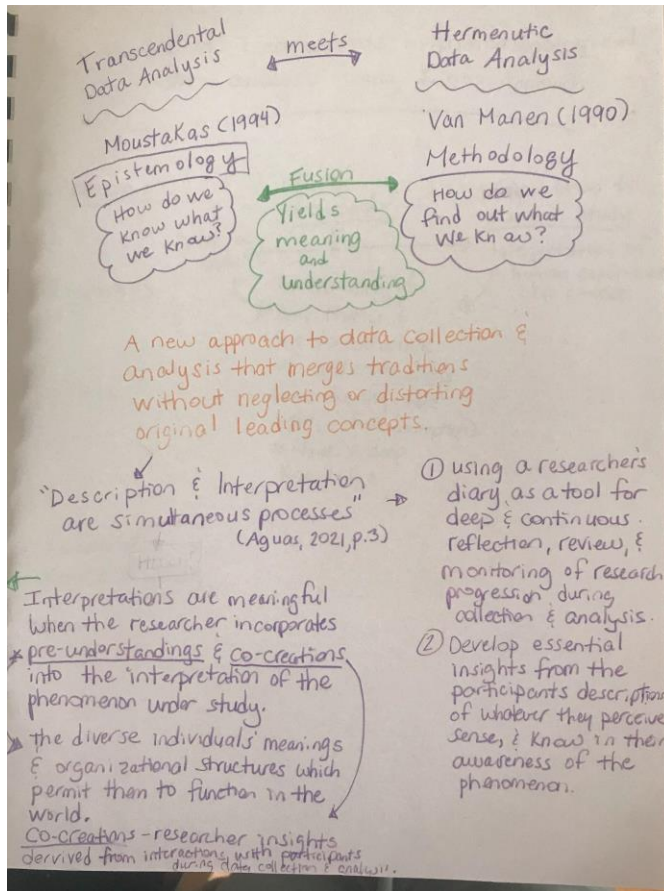
Note: A fusion approach that merges traditions without negotiating original concepts.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Transcripts

To gain a sense of understanding and ensure that participants' views are represented accurately, all recorded sessions from interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim using Rev.com, a transcription service. Transcripts were then uploaded to Dedoose for coding. Using a non-linear process and bracketing, the researcher reviewed journal notes reflecting participants' behaviors during each encounter and reread transcribed documents to help establish inherent meaning. The method of interpretation does not occur solely at the end of a project; instead, as researchers interview participants and record notes about their behaviors and

responses, tentative interpretations will influence the landscape of questioning (Seidman, 2019).

Therefore, analytic memos noted emerging themes during the first read of raw data.

Coding Cycle

The first cycle of descriptive coding was done inductively, and the primary content of uploaded transcripts was summarized using simple word phrases (Lungu, 2022). After descriptive codes were established, In Vivo coding helped to identify broad categories. The creation of broad categories using In Vivo coding allowed the researcher to account for all research questions and the representation of participants' spoken words during interview transcripts. In Vivo coding allowed the researcher to analyze participants' verbatim responses further using a neo-institutional theoretical framework to guide an in-depth understanding of how the structures of a political institution restrain the choices and actions of individuals who are part of the institutional system (Dulude & Milley, 2021).

Using a neo-institutional framework as a lens to analyze the emergent themes from data collected during the interpretive analysis process allowed the researcher to explore how internal and external organizational accountability demands contribute to how curriculum leaders perceive their role in selecting and evaluating curricula. A second coding cycle further enhanced data by refining codes using key aspects like frequency or direction of response. This cycle of sub-coding allowed the researcher to attain saturation of data and facilitate additional understanding and the natural development of themes relevant to the phenomenon.

Analyzing participant responses with In Vivo coding using a neo-institutional framework allowed the researcher to interpret participants' exact words during interviews or focus group. At the organizational level, policy mandates have historically driven district demands for all students to achieve proficiency levels on high-stakes testing. The consequences of falling short

of this achievement often result in sanctions related to fund allocation (No Child Left Behind,

2002; Race to the Top Act, 2011). Curriculum leaders are individuals in a larger political arena

and must navigate the challenges of organizational accountability when deciding about

curriculum.

<div align="center">**ETHICAL ISSUES**</div>

Upon submission and approval of an IRB from Molloy University, participants were

asked to complete and sign a consent form to participate in this study. The researcher made it

known to potential participants that there are no known risks associated with the study, and the

expected benefits of participating are the advancement of knowledge and understanding of

qualitative research. In addition, participants were allowed to view transcripts and verify that all

raw data represented their experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the study cannot

reference or link the identity of participants to individual responses. However, each participant

was assigned a fictitious name or a unique identifier. Therefore, a signed copy of participant

consent forms was provided and outlined how pseudonyms for participants' names and site

locations ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed that any electronic

files used to collect and analyze data would be locked and inaccessible to anyone except the

researcher. Finally, participants were made aware that consent to take part does not lock them

into a commitment, and they can choose to back out during the study.

<div align="center">**CONCLUSION**</div>

In conclusion, findings from this hermeneutic phenomenological study add to an existing

robust body of literature that suggests an interconnectedness between the historically

implemented federal and state policy mandates and the unsustainable outcomes that previous

researchers have outlined (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Horsford et al., 2019; Murgatroyd &

Sahlberg, 2016; Zarra, 2016). In addition, Aguas (2022) stated, "The use of a combined approach to data analysis and methodological triangulation as a validation technique provides credibility and trustworthiness to the proposed fusion of approaches" (p. 17). A fusion approach to data collection and analysis addresses the conundrum often referred to by critics of a phenomenological approach who maintain that hermeneutic methods imply subjectivity and researcher bias and ultimately compromise trustworthiness. This study informs policymakers and raises awareness about the importance of stakeholder involvement. Ultimately, this qualitative research study adds a new layer of in-depth understanding to the critical issue of unsustainable education by analyzing curriculum leader perspectives.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS, RESULTS, AND INTERPRETATIONS

Focused on elementary literacy curriculum, this phenomenological study seeks insight into curriculum leaders' lived experiences and perceptions as they navigate the multifaceted landscape of accountability while engaging in their roles. A phenomenological research design using a constructivist approach investigated how curriculum leaders' perceptions and understandings manifest through their lived experiences (Beaudry & Miller, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). By exploring the intricate interplay between curriculum leaders' roles, decision-making processes, and external accountability structures, this research contributes valuable insights to inform equitable educational policies and practices. In essence, this study's findings emphasize the numerous obstacles that curriculum leaders must address to ensure equal educational opportunities for students across Long Island.

Chapter Overview

This chapter offers an in-depth and comprehensive exploration of participant responses to semi-structured interview questions and focus groups. In addition, a detailed analysis of the descriptive and interpretive findings derived from the shared experiences of curriculum leaders is described. Numerous emerging themes have been discerned throughout the data analysis process, particularly concerning the perception of curriculum leader roles and the challenges they describe while navigating the intricate structures of accountability during decision-making processes relating to the literacy curriculum. The application of Aguas' (2022) fusion method, outlined in Table 2 Appendix A, resulted in the integration of transcendental descriptions with interpretive findings to cultivate a profound and nuanced comprehension of curriculum leaders' experiences.   With ample literature backing the ineffectiveness of over six decades of policy reform (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016; Horsford et al., 2019), it is crucial to investigate the

viewpoints of education stakeholders whose roles are directly affected by these reforms. This study's findings give stakeholders fresh insights into how equitable policy changes can achieve desired results. The research questions examined different aspects of curriculum selection and assessment, institutional policy changes, and the influence of federal and state-mandated testing and compliance frameworks on fair curriculum selection.

METHODOLOGY

Participant and District Demographics

Study participants represent a group of curriculum leaders, each bringing unique perspectives and experiences to this research study. A summary of participant demographics is highlighted in Table 3 Appendix A. Among the participants are four females and three males, aged 42 to 62. All participants identified as White. Their current employment districts span Suffolk and Nassau counties in Long Island, New York. Their years of experience in education range from 21 to over 25 years, with several participants having prior experience as principals. Regarding their involvement in literacy curriculum leadership, most participants have five years or less of experience in this capacity, although one participant had 11-15 years of experience. These demographic details provided a comprehensive overview of the participants' backgrounds and roles within the education system, offering valuable insights for the study's analysis and conclusions.

Study participants represent school districts in Suffolk and Nassau counties, each presenting distinctive demographic compositions. District demographics are summarized in Table 4, Appendix A. In Suffolk County, the K-5 student population varies across represented districts, with notable differences in racial and socioeconomic profiles. For instance, in District A, the majority of students are White (75%), followed by Hispanic (18%) and Black (1%)

students, with a significant portion classified as economically disadvantaged (23%). Conversely, District B exhibits a more diverse student body, with White students comprising 30% of the population, alongside substantial percentages of Hispanic (47%) and Black (15%) students. In Nassau County, the demographic landscape differs, exemplified by District D, where Black students represent the largest racial group (45%), followed by Hispanic (35%) and White (9%) students. This district also reports a considerable proportion of economically disadvantaged students (25%). Conversely, District G in Nassau County demonstrates a significant presence of White students (52%) alongside considerable percentages of Hispanic (36%) and Black (3%) students. These varying demographic profiles emphasize the importance of considering each district's unique contexts and challenges when evaluating equitable educational outcomes.

Diverse Pathways Toward Curriculum Leadership Role

Participants noted embarking on diverse journeys that led them to their current position as curriculum leaders. These journeys were by-products of their unique backgrounds and experiences. Each individual's description of their pathway illustrated their unique process in advancing to their current role as curriculum leaders.

Michael Francis. Michael Francis, currently serving as the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Personnel in District G, highlighted how his role as a secondary language arts teacher and math teacher proved to be valuable to getting him to his curriculum leader post, stating,

> I went the building leader path because I was a teacher of language arts in the city for just
> short of 10 years. I did teach math for two of those ten years, probably pretty badly, but I
> learned a lot. And then I became an assistant principal at 'District X' for five years. Then
> I became a principal in 'District Y' for five years. Then I became a principal in 'District

Z' for 15 years. And then I came here. So I had the building leader path into the

curriculum path.

Francis transitioned to administrative roles, drawing on his firsthand understanding of classroom

dynamics. Reflecting on his path, Francis acknowledges the significance of his time teaching

math, despite initial challenges, in broadening his perspectives. His focus on secondary-level

practices in curriculum selection and adoption stems from this background, suggesting that

personal experiences inform leadership approaches.

Robert Pace. Pace's trajectory into curriculum leadership evolved through roles in high

school science instruction and building administration. Pace stated,

So I taught at 'X' School for two years, which was a great experience, and then got a job

at 'Y' School and taught Science there…chemistry, general science, a little eighth grade

science, and AP chemistry. It was a phenomenal experience. After eight years in the

classroom, I got my school district and school building leadership certificate through 'S

University' and became an assistant principal in 'X' School. Spent a few years doing that

and then became a principal in 'Z' School before coming here.

Pace's tenure in his current curriculum leader role spans more than a decade.

Cathay Morris. Also using her secondary science teaching experience, Morris from

District E, described her secondary science teacher experience as her pathway to a STEM

director and Curriculum Director. Morris's experience offers another example of diverse

pathways converging into curriculum leadership.

Beth Jenkins. Beth Jenkins from District A emphasizes the importance of leveraging

specialized expertise in literacy support, highlighting her elementary education background as a

strong foundation for K-5 literacy curriculum leadership. Her advocacy for literacy coaches

emphasizes recognizing complementary roles within curriculum leadership teams. Jenkins describes her tenure as a ten-year first-grade elementary educator with a focus on literacy. She states,

> I got to do team teaching there where we shared kids. So for the literacy block, we would pull them together and divide them up across skilled levels or however we wanted to group them, but across two classrooms. So I didn't just teach my own kids. I taught my kids and my colleague's kids.

When asked how her experience as a classroom teacher led her to a curriculum leadership position, she explained that she became a literacy coach after her decade-plus classroom experience. She described her coaching experience as,

> Very cool because you were quasi-administrative. It was a great stepping stone to be an administrator, but I was still on the teacher line. I did a lot of coaching, so a lot of modeling, a lot of professional development, a lot of data analysis, a lot of making decisions around curriculum in terms of assessment and supporting teachers in doing that work. And then working alongside the principal and the assistant principal in terms of what we are going to have grade level meetings about and bridging that, which is tricky too, but I really enjoyed it.

Connie Ian. Like Jenkins, Ian from District E transitioned from elementary educator to building principal and ultimately to a district administrator overseeing curriculum and instruction. She described her experience as a kindergarten, first, and fourth-grade teacher before branching out in an administrative capacity. Ian stated,

> I had been an AP for a year and then a principal here for 13 years and after about ten years, I had aspirations of coming to central office in this capacity. I had worked on a lot

of projects within the district report card rewrite. I've been on the curriculum council, which is our curriculum study team. I had supported projects with the former assistant superintendent for curriculum instruction. So when I started here, I didn't have my district level certification. So, at about the 10-year mark, I went for that certification.

These narratives underscore the nuanced interplay between personal backgrounds, professional experiences, and leadership roles in shaping curriculum selection and adoption perspectives. The participants' accounts reveal that their diverse journeys inform their perceptions of their roles and strategies in addressing challenges and navigating the complexities of the K-5 literacy curriculum selection process. All participants emphasized that their previous experiences were paramount to any success they would have in their curriculum leader role.

Wendy Snyder. Snyder from District B explained that as she approached retirement after spending over thirty years as a special educator in the same public school in which she now serves as the Director of Curriculum, she felt an increasing desire to leverage her unique experience to make impactful changes in equitable curriculum opportunities for students in her district. She described her decision to extend her service in public education beyond her anticipated tenure as rewarding and challenging.

Peter Whitman. Whitman from District C described some of his first experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer, where he spent four years in the Central African Republic. He contextualized these early experiences, stating,

> I was teaching calculus, a high-level mathematics, to students in the Central African Republic. Calculus itself is a language. Because you're talking about literacy and language I think indelible for me because I was teaching students for whom French was probably their third or fourth language.

Whitman went on to describe many unique experiences that followed, including his tenure as a founding member of a small public school. He went on to serve as an Assistant Principal and

then Principal. Before his current position as a curriculum leader, he spent more than two decades serving in an administrative capacity in the public school system in Long Island.

Data Collection

Data were collected over four months from December 2023 to March 2024 and included participant demographics obtained from a questionnaire sent via email in December upon receipt of signed participation consent. Once all questionnaires were received, individual interviews were scheduled, and solicited journal prompts were mailed to participants along with a detailed invitation for each participant to use them. The researcher invited participants to bring their journals to the interview and focus group to guide the discussion. Interviews took place within one month of each other from mid-January to mid-February, culminating with a focus group, which was held on March 6, 2024, on the Zoom virtual platform. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Semi-structured individual interview questions focused on curriculum leader descriptions of their role, the challenges they face during the curriculum selection and implementation process, descriptions of current practices, and the influence of policy shifts, including mandated compliance structures and high-stakes testing. At the start of each interview, the researcher reviewed the study's purpose and reiterated the choice to stop participation at any point during the study. Each interview was recorded and uploaded to the transcription service Rev.com. The transcripts were then uploaded to Dedoose, an online platform tailored for qualitative and mixed-methods research. This tool provided functionalities for organizing, analyzing, and interpreting the textual data obtained from the initial round of semi-structured interviews and a subsequent round of focus groups.

The focus group comprised four participants representing Districts A, B, C, and E out of the seven participants. The session began with a brief introduction, welcome, and protocol review. Participants were reminded that the session would be recorded, and their identities would

remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms for data presentation. The researcher

facilitated the focus group discussion utilizing four-word clouds, each representing frequently

used words related to different topics discussed during individual interviews—the first-word

cloud (Figure 9) depicted responses regarding descriptions of curriculum leader roles. The

second word cloud (Figure 10) reflected responses about the challenges faced by curriculum

leaders. The third-word cloud (Figure 11) captured discussions on literacy curricula, committees,

and new standards. Lastly, the fourth-word cloud (Figure 12) summarized responses to questions

about the influence of policy shifts, compliance structures, and equitable policies.

Figure 9

First-Word Cloud

Figure 10

Second-Word Cloud

Figure 11

Third-Word Cloud

Figure 12

Fourth-Word Cloud
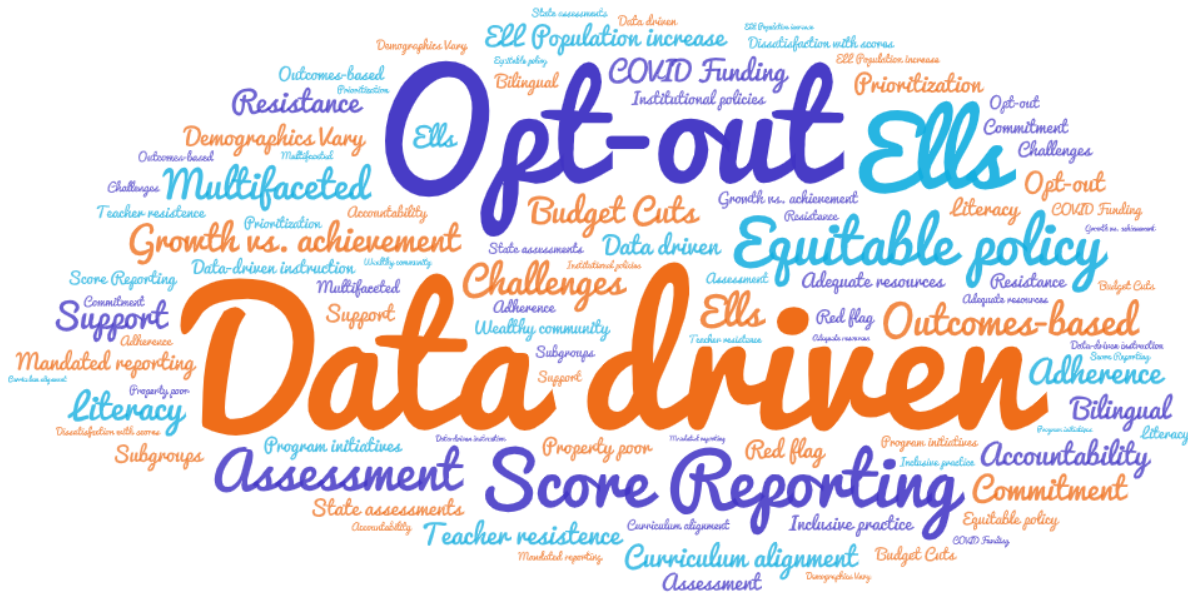
Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure for the study comprised two phases of coding. The first phase, descriptive coding, was conducted inductively, summarizing the fundamental content of the uploaded transcripts using straightforward word phrases (Lungu, 2022). The first round of coding yielded thirteen categories that facilitated the identification of broader categories during the subsequent round of In Vivo coding. Utilizing In Vivo coding enabled the researcher to delve deeper into participants' verbatim responses while employing a neo-institutional theoretical framework to gain insights into how the structures of a political institution influence the decisions and behaviors of individuals within the institutional framework (Dulude & Milley, 2021).

Following the completion of the second cycle of coding, the researcher organized datasets to compile excerpts from interviews based on these codes. Using a printed copy, the

researcher conducted further analysis, manually coding participant responses and displaying

them on chart paper. This visual aid facilitated the identification of emerging themes, as

illustrated in Figure 13

Figure 13

Emerging Themes
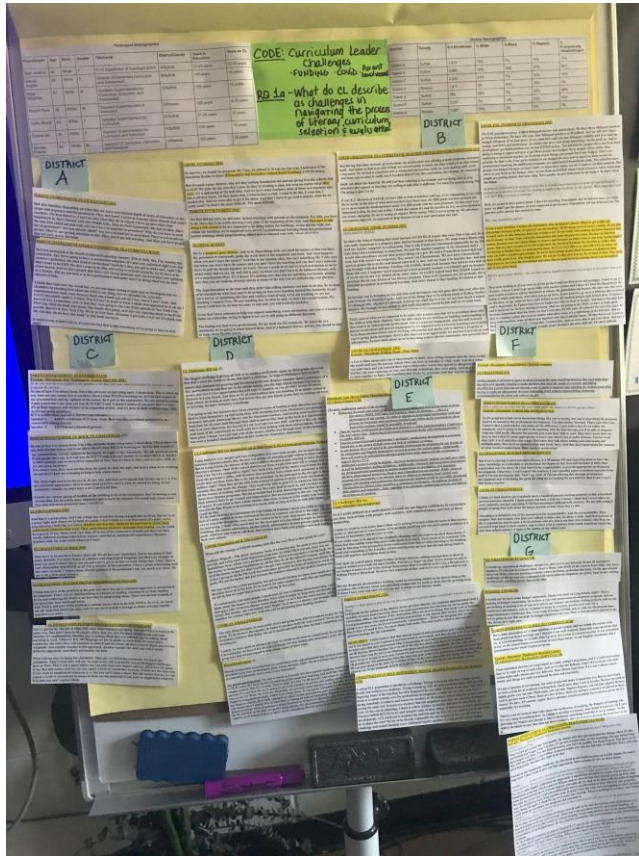
Thirteen codes from the first coding round were categorized into six overarching themes,

ensuring comprehensive coverage of the research questions and participants' dialogue during

interview and focus group sessions. These themes encompassed Curriculum Leader Role,

Curriculum Leader Challenges, ELA Curriculum and Program Selection Process, Institutional

Policy Shifts, Mandated Compliance Structures and Data Reporting, and Mandated Testing and

Universally Equitable Policies. Employing a non-linear process and bracketing, the researcher

reviewed journal notes and memos reflecting participants' behavior during each encounter to

attain a deeper understanding. The analysis highlighted the intricate interplay between policy

mandates, organizational accountability, and the decision-making processes of curriculum

leaders within the broader political landscape, emphasizing the multifaceted challenges they

encounter in navigating these dynamics.

Table 5

Descriptive and In Vivo coding

First Cycle: Descriptive Codes	Second Cycle: In Vivo Codes
Background & Experience	Curriculum Leader Role (RQ1)
CL Role	
Rewards	Curriculum Leader Challenges (RQ 1a)
Vision	
CL Challenges	Variations in Literacy Curriculum Selection
Foundation aid and grants	and Implementation Across School Districts
COVID	(RQ 1a)
Parent Involvement	
Teacher Preparation/Preparedness	Influence of Policy Shifts (RQ2)
ELA Curriculum/Program	
Literacy Committee	Mandated Compliance Structures (RQ 2a)
Science of Reading Shift	
Influence of Policy Shifts	Mandated Testing & Equitable Practices
	(RQ 2b)
Mandated Compliance Structures	
Data and Score Reporting	
Mandated Testing/Equitable Policies	
ELL and Special Education Students	

A Fusion Approach

In conclusion, a fusion approach to qualitative data analysis involves integrating multiple

qualitative data sources or methods to enhance the depth and breadth of analysis. This approach

recognizes the richness and complexity of qualitative data and aims to maximize insights by

combining various analytical techniques. The application of Aguas' (2022) fusion approach in

the current study has illuminated seven key themes, as summarized in Table 2 (Appendix A). The researcher embarked on an iterative journey to uncover meaning, understanding, and interpretation by integrating transcendental epistemology (Moustakas, 1994) and hermeneutic methodology (Van Manen, 1990). This fusion approach, as suggested by Aguas, entails blending positivist and interpretivist epistemological assumptions, objective and subjective perspectives, and etic and emic methodological perspectives to elucidate the essence of experience. By embracing this holistic approach, the study has garnered deeper insights into the lived experiences of K-5 literacy curriculum leaders, highlighting the value of integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies in qualitative inquiry.

NEO-INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of findings was guided by Dulude and Milley's (2021) description of neo-institutional theory, which provides a framework for understanding how the structures of political institutions influence the decisions and actions of individuals within the system, particularly literacy curriculum leaders. This framework guided the interpretive analysis process, particularly in exploring how internal and external accountability demands shape curriculum leaders' choices in selecting and evaluating curricula. Policy mandates at the organizational level have historically influenced district priorities and resource allocation. As participants in the current study described, shortcomings in performance and achievement can lead to sanctions and potential loss of district control to external agencies. Dulude and Milley underscore the importance of contextualizing educational leaders' decisions within the complexities of institutional settings. Thus, applying the principles of neo-institutional theory allowed for examining the constraints on curriculum leaders operating within larger institutional systems, shedding light on their decision-making processes amid organizational accountability challenges.

FINDINGS

Findings from this hermeneutic phenomenological research study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of elementary-level literacy curriculum leaders in Long Island, NY, regarding their roles in selecting, implementing, and evaluating the K-5 literacy curriculum and the challenges they face in navigating accountability structures. Informed by a literature review that contextualizes the historical and contemporary landscape of inequity within the American education system, this study sheds light on the intricate interplay between educational policies, accountability measures, and the pursuit of equitable education reform. By employing a neo-institutional framework during data analysis, the researcher gained insights into how institutional factors influence the phenomena under study, providing a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and informing theoretical interpretations of the data. This study contributes a nuanced understanding of how curriculum leaders perceive their roles and negotiate accountability structures, magnifying the imperative to dismantle barriers to educational equity.

Emerging Themes

The codes assigned to excerpts within each transcript were used to navigate the complexities of each response and shed light on distinct aspects of the research questions. Using keywords and phrases from the research questions as a guide when generating the first round of codes, broader themes began to emerge. For example, a deeper understanding of how curriculum leaders describe their role and how they envisioned a trajectory for the future appeared as a focal point, revealing significant variations. Furthermore, challenges within this role were delineated, including consistency of literacy programs and instructional practices, political barriers associated with parent involvement efforts and teacher preparedness, and resource availability.

Additionally, discussions around literacy curriculum and program selection processes, including the variations in the role of formed literacy committees and leadership capacity, emerged as another theme. Changes in institutional policies and mandated compliance structures, including participant roles in data and score reporting, utilization of outcome-based assessment, and adjustments in fund allocation due to the loss of ESSER funding, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic, were notable themes that highlighted the influence of organizational directives on curriculum selection and implementation. Moreover, the complexities of mandated testing and the pursuit of universal, equitable policies, particularly related to how accountability structures influence literacy curriculum decisions, emerged as another theme. The researcher used these codes to decipher the multifaceted landscape of shared experiences among educational leaders, offering subtle insights into their challenges and opportunities.

Finding 1: Disparate Curriculum Leader Roles and Duties

Curriculum leaders exhibited notable disparities in their perceptions and delineations of their roles and duties. It became evident that every district was different in their conception of a curriculum leader, from the terminology to job responsibilities. The first disparity was related to participant job titles. Districts had a plethora of titles for curriculum leaders that included Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Assessment, and Personnel, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Director of Elementary Curriculum and Assessment, and K-12 Coordinator of Reading/AIS/RTI. The appearance of these titles indicated differences in expected responsibilities. For example, five out of the seven titles incorporated the term "curriculum." At the same time, the remaining two used the terms "reading" and "instruction," hinting at the potential absence of direct involvement in curriculum selection. Additionally, it is

worth noting that although District G and District A participants hold titles that imply involvement in assessment or accountability, Francis from District G clarified that his district has dedicated assessment and data personnel.

Despite the vast differences in titles, all seven participants reported that some of their role as district-level literacy/ELA curriculum leaders was dedicated to making final decisions concerning selection, implementation, and evaluation of literacy/ELA curricula. Other areas of reported involvement included designing professional development around new literacy programs, Title-1 grant management, and informing building leadership and superintendents about grant funding opportunities. Participants attributed their participation and role delegation to specific dynamics related to their district.

Curriculum Leaders and Their Many Hats: A Gamut of Roles and Responsibilities

According to Cathy Morris from District E, Size Matters highlights how the size of a district influences budget disparities and the curriculum decision process, thus impacting the hierarchy within the educational system. She asserted,

> In a small place (District E), the budget is tight. In larger districts, adding a person here or there to support initiatives is a little bit more feasible. You have a larger tax base. Every person we add to our budget is more of a hit to the average homeowner than it would be at, let's say, a District X or District Y. So we're very cognizant of that, and we're very careful what we ask for.

In addition, Dr. Morris described her district as an International Baccalaureate (IB) Continuum District, whose philosophy "centers on learners - promoting healthy relationships, ethical responsibility, and personal challenge." She also identified IB coordinators in each building as unofficial leaders in curriculum matters. In the absence of literacy coaches and directors, Dr.

Morris argues that her job as a curriculum leader requires her to wear many hats, which sometimes impedes her efforts to focus on the process of selecting and implementing a K-5 literacy curriculum.

Conversely, Connie Ian from District F, whose district was six times the size of Morris' in addition to a vastly different demographic profile, described a comprehensive role encompassing research, program selection, professional development facilitation, and continuous availability, emphasizing the need for personal dedication and supportive administrators. She described her role as being, first and foremost, the kind of administrator that her staff can feel safe coming to. She stated, "I can purchase curriculum resources, but it's really about having a supportive administrator to build relationships and teacher capacity. If you don't have the right administrator doing that, it's going to be difficult to move that building toward growth and achievement.". Ian emphasized prioritizing a collaborative relationship between administrators and teachers versus any constituency taking on challenges alone.

Wendy Snyder is Director of Elementary Curriculum and Assessment in District B, a large and demographically diverse district in Suffolk County, which she described as "a property-poor district." Snyder delineates her role as multifaceted, prioritizing the selection and implementation of literacy curriculum, along with grant writing and reporting for Title funding. She elaborated on the ongoing audit process inherent to being a Title 1 school district, stating,

> As part of the audit process, I have to demonstrate that I didn't simply allocate teacher salaries towards teaching gifted and talented students. I must show that if designated in the grant, it was utilized for providing specialized instruction that would positively impact the targeted student population.

Snyder conveyed that a significant portion of her time is dedicated to ensuring the state is apprised of their progress and achievements for fear of fund reallocation or loss for non-compliance. The examination of Snyder's experience, detailing the prioritization of compiling state data over other curriculum obligations, was framed within a neo-institutional lens, which elucidates the impact of external institutional pressures, such as policy mandates like No Child Left Behind, on participants' actions and decision-making processes. These standards often result in sanctions related to funding allocation.

When asked to describe his role, Michael Francis from District G detailed his role's predominant focus on personnel matters, such as conducting teacher observations. Francis elaborated on this challenge by stating, "So the operational challenges of the person who's charged with curriculum development are pretty huge in any setting so I'm really pedaling pretty fast on my bike." Adding to the description of his role, he noted that his district uses an evidence-based model where "things are really scrutinized for data and exactitude," but the responsibilities of data reporting and state testing are not within his purview, as the district has designated personnel specifically hired for these tasks, despite "assessment" being part of his title.

Beth Jenkins is District A's K-12 Literacy/AIS/RTI Coordinator in Suffolk County. District A is three times the size of District E, but half the size of District F is representative of many districts across Long Island. While district demographics show a predominantly White student population (75%), Jenkins describes a recently growing enrollment of ELLs and stresses that many of those ELLs are enrolled in one of the three elementary schools. She articulated her role with multifaceted responsibilities, including overseeing elementary education, summer learning programs, and MTSS initiatives, leveraging her elementary background. Jenkins stated,

"So I'm very much unofficially a director of elementary ed because that's what I can bring to the table that other people can't." Ultimately, all participants desired to establish a team of literacy support administrators, albeit for varying reasons.

In conclusion, the variances observed among curriculum leaders in their perceptions and delineations of roles and duties highlight the complexity and disparity within the educational leader landscape. The diversity in titles and job descriptions emphasizes the multifaceted nature of leadership in literacy curricula across Long Island. While each curriculum leader brings a unique perspective and skill set to their respective roles, institutional structures often go beyond their control and create barriers perpetuating inequity. As the field of education continues to evolve, especially post-pandemic, it is imperative to acknowledge disparities and foster equitable policies regarding literacy curriculum selection and evaluation.

Rewarding Aspects & A Vision for the Future

During individual interviews, as the conversation delved into the roles of curriculum leaders, the researcher prompted participants to share both the fulfilling aspects of their role and their aspirations and visions for the future. For example, Cathy Morris from District E outlined a primary goal for the year, emphasizing the need to refocus on academic standards and ensure student success post-pandemic. She highlighted the importance of aligning curriculum with standards and supporting teachers to become literacy experts, albeit facing challenges due to the complexity of program choices. Conversely, Connie Ian from District F envisioned the role of directors or chairs in supporting curriculum development and implementation, aiming for a faster realization of her ideas with additional support. She emphasized investing in teacher effectiveness over program selection, recognizing the significance of teacher expertise in diagnosing student needs and fostering skill development. Peter Whitman from District C

identifies a need for literacy coaches to enhance teacher support and improve instructional practices, suggesting a collaborative approach involving coaches working alongside teachers and addressing budget constraints by prioritizing resources effectively. Both Jenkins of District A and Snyder of District B stress the importance of implementing a literacy program that caters to the needs of all students, grounded in the principles of the Science of Reading, aiming to foster consistency and bridge the achievement gaps. Despite varying descriptions of their roles as curriculum leaders, participants shared a common vision of prioritizing teacher capacity and aligning curriculum to standards.

Finding 2: Managing Challenges in Curriculum Leadership

It was apparent during research that curriculum leaders were required to traverse a myriad of political and professional dynamics, while being out of their control provided a significant challenge to the execution of their job. Although curriculum leaders held common aspirations for the future, they encountered various obstacles including the consistency of literacy program selection and teaching methods, political hurdles impacting parental engagement, and teacher preparedness. Each participant described the influence of these barriers on their ability to make decisions about curriculum, highlighting the imperative of implementing equitable policies to guarantee access to high-quality education and pathways to growth and achievement for every student regardless of district demographics or test scores.

Lack of Consistency Poses a Barrier to Student Learning

One of the primary challenges faced by participants in all districts is the need for more consistency in teaching methods, materials, and curricular programs and services across schools and classrooms. The inconsistent implementation of a chosen literacy program, the varying levels of professional development surrounding pedagogy, and a lack of resources pose a

significant barrier to student learning and equitable access to education. For example, in District C, an affluent, demographically uniform district in Nassau County, Whitman expressed concerns about the need for more consistency in teaching methods, materials, and curriculum across schools and classrooms. Whitman highlighted how teachers' autonomy has led to vastly different experiences for students within the same district, which he believes to be detrimental to learning. Whitman argued,

> When you're talking about literacy, the language we use as adults to teach kids, the more that's consistent, the more they will continue to absorb and the better off they learn. Right now it's like whiplash. One teacher teaches this approach: another teacher, another. Next year will be a totally different approach. And that's not healthy for kids.

During a subsequent focus group meeting, in response to a shared word cloud depicting words and phrases from participant responses, Whitmas noticed that words like 'fidelity and consistency" appeared more significant, indicating the frequency of responses; he stated,

> I think fidelity and consistency are all connected to the teacher, right? So those should all be one big fat word somehow because it is all connected. If you can get the teacher, then they'll implement it with fidelity, and the conversations I've had with teachers, it's not so much whether you like it or not; I mean, a lot of great programs out there, but you don't want to give your kids whiplash. One year, they're doing this sort of approach to phonetic learning, and then the next year, it will be this approach or this strategy. And there's a lot of value to a consistent, thoughtful approach, especially in those formative years.

Although he stressed the need to work closely with teachers in deciding on curricular programs, Whitman describes an ongoing debate about curricular programs among the teacher

constituencies that cause delays or possibly prevent final decisions on program selection, thus perpetuating the struggle to maintain fidelity and consistency.

Snyder from District B also highlighted resource limitations as a challenge, affecting the ability to implement initiatives, provide professional development, and support curriculum development. Snyder discussed extensively the efficacy of a recently acquired literacy program and the employment of staff developers financed through COVID-related funds by the district. However, she explains that just as educators were beginning to integrate strategies from the program consistently into their practices, the loss of funding this year would lead to cuts to the literacy program staff developers. She also expressed concern over future adaptations to curricular materials purchased with COVID funding, anticipating an eventual obsolescence in materials. Following the principles of a neo-institutional framework, how participants react to shifts or alterations in institutional contexts, such as changes in COVID-19 funding policies, and the strategies they employ to mitigate these shifts are crucial in comprehending how political changes impact educational outcomes. Snyder described her plan to use in-house instructional leaders to continue the collaborative learning teachers engaged in before funding cuts.

Likewise, Jenkins of District A, Morris representing District E, and Ian from District F highlighted the inconsistency in implementing curricular programs. They all noted that despite the districts purchasing TC units of study, the absence of adequate professional development on their utilization has led to years of erratic implementation. Morris, in particular, expanded on this by illustrating how one could enter a classroom and witness a teacher faithfully utilizing the TC units, while in other classrooms, there would be no evidence of TC units being utilized whatsoever. In addition, Jenkins noted that consistency is a problem, stating,

I would say I haven't solved that problem. I think we've made great gains. But that is a huge issue in our role in curriculum instruction is how do you get consistency when you have over four buildings for the most part for elementary, but then I still supervise fifth and sixth grade in the two middle schools. High school is less of an issue. So I have six schools. How do we make sure that we're doing this?

The supervision of all six schools presented a challenge for Jenkins that she described as a barrier she has yet to overcome.

Even though Francis described cuts to professional development due to anticipated budget limitations, he reiterated an overall satisfaction with the literacy curricular program. He did not anticipate that cuts would influence program consistency and implementation. When asked to elaborate, he stated,

So I think culture takes care of itself here because it's steeped in tradition and still doing things that they probably did in 1934. It's like watching an episode of 'It's a wonderful life'. This place is like that. So there's a lot of things I think that impact the culture and an approach to curriculum, and like anything, it's something that I'm coming to understand.

Francis' depiction of his district's entrenched curriculum approach rooted in tradition implies that adherence to traditional values and methods could impede decisions toward achieving equitable outcomes aligned with contemporary best practices. Indeed, Neo-institutional theory emphasizes the importance of grasping institutional logic, values, and assumptions like those portrayed by Francis as entrenched in tradition. This understanding enables researchers to analyze how underlying logics influence the decision-making process of curriculum leaders. Lack of consistency in instructional methods and resource allocation can lead to learning gaps among students, impeding their academic advancement. Participants concurred that tackling this issue

necessitates coordinated actions to harmonize curriculum frameworks, offer thorough professional development for educators, and institute monitoring systems to uphold established standards. However, they also acknowledged that the absence of uniformity often stems from external factors beyond their influence.

Political Barriers Prevent Parental Involvement & Community Engagement

During semi-structured participant interviews, the researcher inquired about how parents are involved or informed in the curriculum selection process and how, if at all, they are made aware of ways to support literacy at home. While parental involvement was widely recognized as a critical factor in students' academic success among participants, reaching and engaging parents posed unique challenges. Whether through in-person events or virtual platforms, curriculum leaders described challenges to find effective strategies to involve parents in their children's learning journey, promote collaboration between home and school, and address barriers to parental participation. For example, when asked about how parents are informed of curriculum and program shifts, Whitman from District C stated, "I'm a big advocate of just being open. I share data. This is where we are and here are our scores" but when addressing parents who might question the process he stated, "the curriculum selection process is an ongoing challenge that requires some mediation between constituent groups involved to reach an agreement and make a commitment to purchase and implement a program with fidelity." While discussing the difficulties encountered in the existing curriculum selection process, Whitman mentioned his endeavors to present data and scores during public Board of Education meetings. However, he admitted to making limited attempts to engage parents in attending these meetings or involving them in the discussions.

Francis from District G mentions the challenge of attracting parents to in-person events, but lack of attendance could be attributed to the minimal efforts to recruit parents to attend district meetings. Other than the calendar of BOE scheduled meetings and website announcements, efforts to invite parents to collaborate were minimal. When queried about parental responses to curricular programs and services, Francis recounted his initial efforts to introduce "parent development" initiatives in a school he worked for in NYC to enhance parental understanding of curricular programs. Reflecting on community feedback, he expressed concerns that the term "parent developer" might be perceived as insulting, leading him to reconsider its appropriateness. He explained that in hindsight, he contemplated whether the term could be construed as subtly biased, stating, "I don't know if that was softly racist, I don't know." Following this introspection, he mentioned the establishment of a parent portal on their learning management system, encouraging parental involvement through this avenue.

While all four participants in Suffolk County expressed the significance of engaging with the community, including parents, and addressing their concerns or perceptions regarding curriculum content and initiatives, participants in Districts A, B, and F highlighted challenges related to community perceptions, particularly regarding curriculum content focused on historically minoritized populations such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LGBTQ+ populations. Jenkins characterized the curriculum adoption process in her district as polarized, akin to the country's state. She noted that discussions in her district regarding curriculum adoption had included issues like CRT and the perception that a curriculum focused on racial diversity would be seen as trying to coerce students into a specific way of thinking. Emphatically, she stated, "We don't want to be this; we are not trying to convert anybody." Jenkins articulated that hiring teachers and staff who reside in the same community can pose

conflicts between political dynamics and balancing the needs of diverse student populations in the district. Nonetheless, she emphasizes her commitment to upholding professionalism and prioritizing the best interests of the children in her care. She stated,

> But yet we've been sitting here saying there's windows and mirrors, or at least I've been talking to teachers about this forever. And kids need windows and they need mirrors. There's all different kids. We have kids in our district that are transgender. We have kids that are non-binary. So I have to think about the community as a whole in terms of what I'm serving. So the politics of it, I think is that, listen, I don't want teachers to feel like they weren't doing the right thing and they need to feel bad. I can't have families thinking that this district isn't doing the right thing.

Likewise, Ian from District F recounted a similar incident concerning a book that came under scrutiny by the librarian due to its perceived controversial content, although the book had been available on the shelf for years and had yet to be brought to the administration's attention. While there was an explicit directive to remove the book, the fear of political repercussion resulted in discomfort and angst. This aspect of community engagement was not as directly discussed by other participants but instead illustrated the web of political barriers that curriculum leaders must be prepared to battle.

Analyzing the accounts of curriculum leaders who opt to remove books featuring racially and sexually diverse perspectives from library shelves in anticipation of potential political opposition demonstrates how yielding to institutional pressures reinforces the maintenance of the current status quo, thereby perpetuating inequitable and exclusionary educational practices. According to Neo-institutional theorists, institutional pressures can shape the decisions and practices of curriculum leaders, ultimately influencing the perpetuation of unfair and

exclusionary educational practices within the broader institutional context (Dulude & Milley, 2021). Curriculum leaders need to remain vigilant in upholding professional standards and advocating for the best interests of students and educators amidst external pressures. More specifically, curriculum leaders ignored the needs of some of the student body that they serve, followed best practices, and caved to real and imagined political threats to their livelihoods. Ultimately, succumbing to institutional pressures poses significant risks to the educational community, undermining educational quality, equity, and integrity.

Wendy Snyder from District B articulated a shift in perspective regarding parent involvement. She emphasized the transition from mere involvement to genuine engagement, highlighting the importance of fostering a two-way learning dialogue with parents. Snyder remarked,

> There's a shift between parent involvement and parent engagement. It's supposed to be a two-way learning conversation. So in these sessions where you're working with parents and maybe you're sharing a program, or you're giving them strategies, there's also supposed to be an opportunity for parents to provide us with information. So now think about how we're becoming a more diverse community, how powerful that could be.

Notably, Snyder stood out as the sole participant in discussing this shift in mindset. This distinction may stem from the unique challenge faced by District B in demonstrating evidence of parent engagement to secure Title funding. This requirement was of lesser concern to participants from other interviewed districts.

Lack of Teacher Preparedness Requires Leadership Intervention

Concerns regarding teacher readiness in literacy instruction were commonly expressed among participants. They described diverse strategies employed to address these concerns, such

as investing in professional development initiatives through the engagement of external experts, providing continuous support, and fostering collaboration among educators. The shift towards new instructional approaches based on the Science of Reading (SOR) suggests the necessity for comprehensive support and training for teachers across all districts, irrespective of specific demographic considerations. Effective leadership, particularly at the building level, emerged as a crucial element for encouraging teacher involvement and implementing new initiatives. Additionally, efforts to establish curriculum committees were pivotal in guiding curriculum decisions, advocating for teacher support, and promoting collaboration among stakeholders across all interviewed districts.

Morris from District E and Ian from District F, both possessing backgrounds in elementary and literacy education, expressed similar concerns regarding the readiness of new teachers. Morris remarked, "Across K-12, some of the teachers coming to us have a very traditional understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and we're trying to show them what the new research suggests and support them". Echoing Morris's sentiments, Ian stated, "I don't believe higher education adequately prepares them to be in the classroom independently." When asked, Snyder and Jenkins expressed similar concerns over the lack of instruction in teacher preparation programs for teaching literacy.

In contrast, Francis and Pace offered a different perspective. Francis noted that elementary-level teachers often exhibit greater preparedness due to their literacy backgrounds. Pace remarked that newly higher-ed elementary teachers demonstrated higher proficiency at teaching children to read and write. In contrast, secondary teachers focus on teaching a text rather than the reader. Similarly, Francis observed that new teachers in recent years have

demonstrated improved preparedness, attributed to contractual reforms and higher expectations

set during pre-service training.

Additionally, Whitman reported in the individual interview and the focus group that his

primary concern lay securing teacher support and ensuring instructional uniformity, stating, "I'm

not so much worried about the programs, I'm worried about the instructional piece." Whitman

discussed that because of the agreement between teachers and the district, final decisions about

curriculum selection can not be made without all stakeholders' consent. Ultimately, although

Whitman stated in the questionnaire that, as per the district's portrayal of his role, he holds sole

responsibility for curriculum selection decisions, this is not the case because of the agreement

between the teachers and the district. Findings suggest that the emphasis on ensuring

instructional consistency rather than prioritizing program selection might stem from the

difficulties in reaching conclusive curriculum decisions without teachers' consent. Overall,

findings support the need for curriculum leaders to establish consistent strategies to address

concerns about teacher preparedness, such as investing in professional development initiatives,

providing continuous support, and fostering collaboration among educators.

Finding 3: Disparate Literacy Curriculum-ISH Selection and Implementation Processes

Substantial disparities were observed in selecting and assessing literacy programs

resembling curriculum elements. Interviews conducted with curriculum leaders throughout Long

Island provided valuable insights into the diverse and often distinct methods employed in

curriculum and program selection. The notion of characterizing the selection and implementation

process as "curriculum-ish" emerged from an inductive analysis of participant responses

concerning misconceptions about how curriculum and program are defined. Ian stated,

I think the difference between elementary curriculum and programs, if there's such a

difference, is the understanding between standards, curriculum, and program. Curriculum

is truly understanding the standards and meeting kids where they need to be in the

standards and using the programs as a resource to meet the standards.

When asked to elaborate on the process of informing teachers about this critical distinction, Ian

remarked,

See, you could say it over and over and 50% are going to hear it and 50% are not and for

10%, it's going to go completely over their head. I might be being generous there. And

maybe somebody who's set in their ways is just going to be like, oh, I already know what

I'm doing.

Thus, Ian described that an essential part of her role is building leadership capacity and

motivating teachers to increase the overall buy-in for literacy programs.

Snyder also articulated that part of the challenge facing new program implementation is

that sometimes it is difficult for teachers to discern the difference between curriculum and

program. She stated, "We tried to explain to teachers that you have your standards, then you

have your curriculum, then you have your materials."

Francis from District G agreed emphatically that there needs to be more clarity about the

differences between curriculum, program, and standards. When asked to elaborate on what that

looks like in his district, he described his definition and understanding of curriculum, stating,

I have a passion for curriculum. Everything that contributes, everything that's done

intentionally and unintentionally to produce learning, that's a great definition of

curriculum. It's the standards. It's the standards broken down. It's essential questions. It's

enduring understandings. That model, I'm really excited by that. I'm really excited. What

a lot of people refer to as curriculum is just, I don't know. I think it's something else. It's

requirements, it's course selection, it's requirements. Again, it's tests, it's grades, it's how

many points for that, it's not learning. That is bullshit.

This synopsis of participant experiences and insight highlights the ambiguity surrounding the

term "curriculum selection and implementation," stemming from misconceptions about the

authentic definition of curriculum among those responsible for choosing and executing literacy

programs, hence the term "curriculum-ish."

Literacy Curriculum Committees as Part of Curriculum-ish Selection Process

While all seven participants across Long Island districts discussed the recent

establishment of literacy committees, the utilization of these committees varied among districts,

illustrating another example of a "curriculum-ish" approach. For instance, Morris from District E

outlined the formation of a K-12 committee tasked with delineating criteria for robust literacy

instruction. When asked to describe the committee's charge, she stated,

And our mindset at the time was we were going to use this kind of bulleted list of things

that we believe that literacy, strong literacy instruction needs to contain and then go out

and vet different programs and ultimately pick something to support the elementary and

then see how that could help or support the secondary.

Ian formed a literacy committee comprising approximately 16 administrators and teachers

representing all constituents of students. Ian describes the members of the committee,

It includes our bilingual director, our bilingual ENL directors on there to obviously

represent that constituent of students. We have elementary representation in our

administration, and it kind of balances on both. We have a special education teacher on

the committee. We have teachers from the middle school and the high school. It tries to

give us the gamut so we get everybody's point of view in a vertical alignment, if that

makes sense. And we don't make the final decisions. We kind of do all the legwork and

make the recommendation to the superintendent.

Jenkins described the literacy committee in her district as made up of a myriad of teachers at

different grade levels and disciplines but emphasized challenges, stating,

The commitment of coming to a meeting after school gets in your way. That's the

challenge. Teachers and I get it; they're busy. They have lives outside of it. There's only

so many hours in the day. And so not having enough sacred time where we can reach all

teachers and professionally develop them and or elicit input or feedback in a very

systematic way is one of the biggest struggles.

Jenkins described the charge of the literacy committee as one with the specific mandate of

aligning programs with SOR standards.

While Ian, Morris, and Jenkins described the charge of their literacy committees with a

similar charge of vetting new programs to recommend for implementation, Snyder in District B

described the formation of a literacy committee whose charge was to pilot an already funded

program, "My View" chosen for them and purchased during COVID with ESSER funding. She

referred to committee members as "pilot teachers" who convened every six weeks to discuss

implementing the new program in their respective classes. She elaborated, stating,

We had 15-1 teachers on the committee. We had ICT teachers, but I don't know that the

two bilingual teachers were there; I don't remember them being there, so I can't say there

was a bilingual teacher. We had teachers from our Learning Center there. So we tried to

make sure that everyone was there. There had been some consensus among all the groups

of teachers about the program meeting the needs of all the students. Yeah, because it has

more culturally responsive stories.

Snyder described the committee's consensus on the "My View" program as somewhat uniform,

explaining that the more they convened to discuss implementation, the more teachers bought into

the program.

Participants from districts C, D, and G delineated significant disparities in the operations

and objectives of their literacy committees. Whitman observed that despite comprising teachers

from diverse grade levels and disciplines, including English as a New Language (ENL) and

Special Education, the committee hesitantly endorsed a particular program. He remarked,

"They're very cautious. They prefer not to adopt a program but rather to explore best practices,

and we're not adhering to those." In contrast, Pace described their literacy curriculum's selection

and implementation process as a response to an internally developed curriculum crafted by a

hired curriculum writer. Pace noted, "Teachers were engaged, not necessarily in writing it, but in

providing input and reviewing changes." While the balance between preserving academic

autonomy and implementing a consistent literacy program remained a crucial consideration for

ensuring equity in District C, the apparent smoothness of the literacy program implementation

process and teacher acceptance emerged as a notable distinction in how literacy committees are

utilized across different districts on Long Island.

Finding 4: Equitable Literacy Curriculum Decisions in the Aftermath of COVID-19

Participants in the study universally identified the COVID-19 pandemic as the most

significant factor influencing their ability to balance compliance structures with efforts to ensure

equity in literacy education. A pivotal resource during this period was the Elementary and

Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding, allocated as part of the CARES Act and

subsequent relief packages, aimed at aiding schools in addressing pandemic-related challenges. ESSER funds offered flexibility in usage, guided by priorities outlined by the U.S. Department of Education, which included ensuring technology access for remote learning, implementing health measures, supporting mental health services, and addressing learning loss. School districts tailored their ESSER plans to their needs, investing in technology infrastructure, teacher professional development, additional staffing, and interventions to aid struggling students. Ultimately, ESSER funding was crucial in providing financial support to navigate the pandemic's complexities and mitigate its impact on students and schools.

When asked how her district proceeded with ESSER funds, Wendy Snyder from District B described a multifaceted approach to allocating funds, starting with their biggest dilemma: individual devices for teachers and students. Snyder stated,

> We had no technology at the time. So we couldn't just throw that switch and say, okay, we're on Google Classroom now. Because the teachers didn't know how to do it. The children didn't even have accounts. So, we had to come up with another system.

Snyder's depiction of the initial shortage of technology during the onset of COVID mirrored the New York State's guidelines outlining the intended usage of COVID-related funds. Additionally, Snyder reported that ESSER funding was used to purchase a six-year contract for the literacy program "My View" and associated resources but expressed concern over losing that funding in the upcoming year. She states, "We're a property-poor district. And to do those things well, you need the money so that you have the personnel to continually guide the work to the standards and back", highlighting the disparities in how curriculum leaders navigate compliance frameworks while ensuring equity in literacy education.

Francis presented an alternate perspective even though the discussion about the loss of COVID-19 funding emerged during his interview. While he described the richness of the professional development program in his district, he also pondered the imminent necessity to trim budgets for summer curriculum writing projects and keynote speakers for superintendent conferences. Francis elucidated, "I was ready to budget $10,000, and we said, for the present time, we're going to put that on hold. So budget constraints are real. We are in the throes of it right now". Francis' depiction of how COVID funds were allocated to support non-mandated services and additional curriculum endeavors, rather than investing in fundamental technology to facilitate virtual learning, as in Snyder's district, demonstrates the considerable disparities in district needs and the impact of COVID funding on the curriculum decision-making process.

Additionally, in the time between Peter Whitman's initial interview, where he conveyed minimal impact on district staffing and resources due to the anticipated loss of COVID funding, and his participation in a focus group approximately one month later, a notable shift occurred. He disclosed the necessity of eliminating several teaching positions due to increased personnel facilitated by COVID-19 funding. Reflecting on the decision to allocate COVID funds towards additional personnel, Whitman expressed regret, acknowledging it might not have been the most prudent choice as the imminent loss of full-time teaching staff loomed. When queried about his priorities regarding the allocation of funds for technology, resources, and personnel, Whitman explained,

> So I used some of those funds, a significant portion to purchase, a literacy program called
> Fundations. If you're going to supply Fundations to a school district our size, that's a lot
> of money. That's a big commitment. But we had that kind of funds left over and the
> federal funding.

Whitman detailed the procurement of the literacy program despite contractual limitations on imposing curricular programs on teachers in his district. He expressed hope that the mere provision and encouragement to utilize the program would persuade teachers of its benefits and potential positive impact on learning. Whitman elaborated,

> After purchasing curricular programs to pilot, we observed a significant buy-in from teachers at the elementary level. Based on their interest, we secured training and ordered additional resources. So allowing teachers to experience the benefits of the piloted programs helped us to secure proper training and resource allocation.

The findings indicate that the approach described by curriculum leaders in utilizing COVID funding reveals areas for improvement in planning for the unavailability of funding aid and disparities in their ability to navigate compliance structures and make decisions regarding equitable educational opportunities. Moreover, the findings underscore the necessity for curriculum leaders to prioritize enhancing their capacity to navigate and overcome political barriers that impede the provision of equitable educational opportunities.

Assessment and Mandated Compliance Structures Present Multifaceted Challenges

In exploring participants' experiences describing the influence of institutional policy shifts on their role in the literacy curriculum decision-making process, findings suggest that curriculum leaders face multifaceted challenges across districts. The perspectives of curriculum leaders from Districts A through G shed light on their experiences and responses to institutional policy shifts.

For example, Beth Jenkins from District A emphasized the significance of assessment and data-driven instruction in shaping the literacy curriculum. Despite challenges with teacher resistance towards assessments, Jenkins acknowledges the importance of aligning curriculum

decisions with assessment outcomes. Although Jenkins reported that before COVID, one of the schools in the district had a higher Opt-Out rate than the others, she explained that since then, opt-out numbers have decreased. She does not perceive the opt-out movement as a significant issue moving forward, indicating a re-prioritization of adherence to mandated assessment practices. However, Jenkins described the lack of consistent administrative capacity as some building administrators give into the politics of the movement by saying, "yea, just send the letter. Let them opt out. Now I don't have to deal with it on the day of the test because they already sent a note". This response suggests that the ability of building administrators to communicate the potential benefits of assessments to parents remains a challenge and highlights the influence of underlying institutional logic on school leader behavior, a tenet of a neo-institutional framework. Jenkins also notes that assessment scheduling and reporting are time-consuming parts of her role and often take time spent on curriculum planning.

Wendy Snyder from District B explains that her struggles center on providing adequate support for English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly in bilingual programs. She recognizes the imperative for these programs to better cater to the needs of ELLs, especially considering the mandate to report growth and achievement as a condition for Title funding. Snyder's perspective suggests aligning literacy curriculum decisions and assessment practices to meet the needs of linguistically diverse student populations. Like Jenkins, assessment scheduling and data reporting consume much of her role as a curriculum leader.

In addition, Whitman describes using the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) assessment as somewhat problematic. He states, "Part of the problem is nobody knows what to do with the NWEA. So we use it as a cut-off." He explains that if student scores do not indicate a need for services or additional curricular support, "there's no sense in how we can use it to help

an average or above average student improve even more." Whitman also expressed

dissatisfaction with state-reported assessment scores, stating,

> Yes, we have a high ENL population, but by and large we have a wealthy community
>
> with lots of support in the district. But yeah, there's no red flags, our subgroups are all in
>
> good shape even though they're not where they should be for a district in our
>
> geographical region of Long Island.

Whitman's approach suggests that this idea of "being in good shape" depends on the district's

demographics and less on a universal design that aligns institutional policies with inclusive

practices to ensure equitable outcomes for all students. However, unlike Jenkins and Snyder,

who describe assessment and score reporting as a significant and consuming part of their role,

Whitman stated that his district hired a data person who handles data reports, thus relieving him

of that set of duties.

Robert Pace from District D emphasizes using multiple data points for assessments and

intervention placement. He remains committed to comprehensive assessment strategies and

suggests the importance of nuanced decision-making in the literacy curriculum. Pace's

perspective offers an example of the disparities in curriculum decision-making processes across

districts in Long Island and highlights the need to align institutional policies and the adoption of

evidence-based practices in curriculum decision-making processes. Furthermore, Pace describes

how teachers create their own assessments in addition to benchmark assessments and use other

standardized assessments like i-Ready. Pace stated, "We use multiple data points to determine

whether students are on grade level, and identify who needs what type of intervention." He

reiterated the importance of using multiple assessments to make critical curricular decisions.

Like Snyder, Cathy Morris from District E grapples with challenges in providing adequate support for ELLs and students with disabilities due to staffing shortages requiring students needing both services to be pulled out of the classroom too often, signaling a need for program restructuring. She explained the challenge by stating,

> When you have a student who is both an ELL and a student with disabilities, we take the triage approach. Which one will be the most effective? We don't necessarily put them in both right away. If there's going to be a pullout service, what will be the lowest-lying fruit? Which one can we get students to make progress on so that the other service we would then apply would be more meaningful? Applying services just to check a box can't be the philosophy.

Her acknowledgment that small districts with low tax revenue can impact the acquisition of staffing and resources suggests an awareness of the influence of institutional policy shifts on resource allocation within the curriculum decision-making process. Morris's perspectives also suggest the imperative of mandating policy with the provision of equitable resources for diverse student populations. Unlike Jenkins, who reported opt-outs as being of no concern, Morris described them as problematic. She expressed frustration with parent requests to "opt-out" (refuse to allow) their child from the NYS assessments, stating, "If done by all, it could start to provide us with some beneficial information. We just don't really get a lot out of it here because of the number of opt-outs." She approximated the district's opt-out rate at 70%. She attributed it to a culture in which parents feel that they can opt-out their children but may not fully understand how it skews results on the NYS education report card for the district.

Connie Ian acknowledges that the challenges posed by high opt-out rates affect accountability while striving to support struggling students. Her commitment to providing

support amidst accountability pressures reflects a balancing act between institutional mandates and student needs. Ian's perspective suggests that institutional policy shifts influence the prioritization of accountability measures within the curriculum decision-making process. Ian discussed how policies, often mandated, can financially constrain districts, as they may require additional staff, documentation hours, or purchases. Usually, the district feels pressure to comply with policies before state assessments, emphasizing a shift towards a testing-focused, outcome-based education model and away from a growth model. Although previously included on accountability lists, Ian stresses the importance of prioritizing growth over overall achievement, acknowledging the inequities of comparing districts due to variations in testing participation rates. Ian discussed at length the extensive compliance hoops her district has to jump through to remain compliant and stay off the accountability list. She stated,

> The ESA accountability list is the lowest 5% of Title I schools. So you're not even looking at schools that are not Title One. It's really when you break it down like that for people who aren't in the process, it's really unfair. If you want to talk about lack of equity, you're saying Title One schools aren't going to do as well because they are targeting the lowest 5% of a Title One school, which is kind of frustrating.

She also underscores the expectation for a 95% participation rate in state assessments, with the potential for funding repercussions in cases of non-compliance. Nonetheless, Ian observes that sanctions are infrequent, particularly given the disparities in participation rates among districts, prompting skepticism about the efficacy of mandates in fulfilling their intended purposes. Utilizing a neo-institutional framework to analyze Ian's descriptions demonstrates how institutional norms, values, and regulations shape individual and organizational conduct.

Michael Francis from District G spoke of efforts to implement ICT programs at every grade level and every school but faced challenges adjusting to increased student needs, particularly among ELLs. His recognition of the need for better training and support for ENL teachers suggests the impact of institutional policies on professional development initiatives within the curriculum decision-making process. Francis explained that the preparation of level one and two reports required by the state are separate from his role because they have a hired district data person who handles that role. In addition, when asked about the opt-out rate in his district, he reported that it is not a problem. Like Whitman, Francis expressed no concern over the performance scores on state assessments. Francis's perspective highlights the necessity of aligning policy shifts with targeted support mechanisms for educators serving diverse student populations.

Analyzing participants' experiences concerning the influence of institutional policy changes on the duties of curriculum leaders in shaping literacy curriculum decisions highlights the varied challenges and roles these leaders encounter across districts. Regardless of a district's location, demographics, or test scores, achieving equitable policy and program adoption will prove unattainable due to discrepancies in roles among literacy curriculum leaders and utilizing an ableist deficit model approach to reform.

Finding 5: Disparities in the Alignment of Equitable Policy and Current Practice

Curriculum leaders across Long Island describe the influence of federal and state mandates and accountability structures in diverse ways, including how they define and explain their roles. Whitman addresses the issue of educational equity, underlining the desire to ensure that all students, regardless of their school or background, receive a high-quality education. However, he also discussed the challenges his district faces, expressing,

I think part of the struggle in District C has been the existence of silos and sometimes a view that, well, these 'ENL kids', these are your kids. So you fix 'em, you take care of 'em. Special ed… they're yours. You fix 'em.

Whitman articulated the advantages of introducing Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) classes to support students with diverse needs in one of the elementary schools in his district. Despite the widespread need for ICT services across all schools in the district, Whitman disclosed that only one of the three elementary schools currently offers this service. He identified a longstanding challenge within his district, suggesting that a universally equitable program struggles to sustain itself due to prioritizing district funds exclusive of ICT. While Whitman acknowledged ICT as beneficial yet costly, he expressed uncertainty about the community's stance on its partial implementation, hinting at a lack of prioritization for ICT across all school buildings potentially rooted in a general ableist mindset among stakeholders. Garcia-Barrera (2023) defines ableism as a systemic form of discrimination and prejudice against individuals with disabilities, evident in societal attitudes, policies, and practices that marginalize and oppress them. This perspective underscores the widespread nature of ableism, contributing to inequality and exclusion for individuals with disabilities. Whitman underscores the challenges in implementing ICT programs. This emphasizes the need to break down barriers within the curriculum decision-making process. When districts fail to accommodate students with disabilities for equal access to educational opportunities, they effectively employ an ableist approach. While disparities in equitable practices are observable across Long Island's districts, it is particularly noteworthy when significant disparities exist within the same district, among schools situated miles apart, illustrating the varying ways that curriculum leaders prioritize accountability mandates while carrying out their role.

Morris from District E extensively discussed her dedication to fostering inclusive opportunities for all students, particularly English Language Learners (ELLs) requiring Special Education services. She recounted a research study she conducted during her tenure in her previous district, where she discovered that some students spent only an hour per day in their classrooms. Reflecting on these findings, she remarked, "What are we doing to these children? Of course, they aren't learning anything." Equipped with this insight, she expressed concern over the dilemma she faces as a curriculum leader in her current district. She characterized this challenge as prioritizing services that facilitate student progress, ensuring that interventions are meaningful rather than procedural. Morris emphasized that the primary obstacles she encounters in her district stem from its small size, limited interaction time with stakeholders such as teachers and administrators, and a lack of focused leadership.

In contrast, Francis portrays a fully implemented K-5 Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) program in his district, where students began to receive more equitable services once teachers adjusted to the structure. He described how, in this program, a special education teacher collaborates with a general education teacher throughout the entire school day. However, when asked how much special education teachers may incorporate the general education literacy curriculum, Francis expressed uncertainty. Although he conveyed confidence in the benefits of the ICT program, he admitted uncertainty regarding the inclusion of English as a New Language (ENL) teachers in professional development related to new literacy curriculum initiatives. He conceded, "No, I don't think we've provided the TC training, per se, to the ENL teachers. These are great questions. I am going to take copious notes after we meet because I don't have a good handle on it." This finding suggests that while Francis recognizes the value of receiving federally

and state-mandated services for ELLS, the district does not prioritize the curricular program and associated teacher training for ENL teachers.

Curriculum leaders across Long Island encounter numerous obstacles to overcome to ensure educational equity and deliver a universal education to all students. Delving into their viewpoints on neo-institutional issues, such as the influence of institutional pressures, shifts, and logic on budget limitations, parental engagement, and inconsistency, emphasizes the importance of challenging the existing norms and refraining from making assumptions rooted in stereotypes. Breaking down the barriers and tackling these challenges head-on is the only way to advance toward establishing educational systems that are more equitable and more efficient, fostering the academic prosperity and holistic well-being of each student.

Insights into Challenges Faced by Demographically Similar Districts

Curriculum leaders involved in this study outlined various overarching challenges about their roles and duties. While the findings indicated that K-5 enrollment figures played a minimal role in the shared challenges across districts, low socioeconomic and affluent communities faced similar obstacles. For instance, participants from Districts B and F, identified as low socioeconomic communities with a majority Black and Hispanic population, based on criteria established by the researcher utilizing NYS Department of Education data (20-21), described themselves as property-poor districts contending with compliance structures, COVID-19 funding issues, sanctions, and striving to provide adequate ENL and Special Education services. On the contrary, Districts C and G, identified as affluent with predominantly White student enrollment, reported sufficient funding from a prosperous tax base. They emphasized their technological resources and displayed little concern regarding sanctions linked to score reporting. However, these districts also acknowledged challenges associated with implementing equitable programs

for their limited ENL population. Furthermore, Districts C and G highlighted staffing advantages, such as dedicated teams of directors or literacy coaches, as well as personnel specifically assigned to assessment and score reporting tasks, which relieved Curriculum Leaders from the time-consuming burden experienced in Districts B and F. In summary, this examination of curriculum leaders' experiences underscores their diverse challenges across districts, revealing common hurdles and unique circumstances influenced by socioeconomic factors and demographic composition.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study reveal striking disparities among curriculum leaders in their understanding and execution of roles and responsibilities. Mastery in curriculum leadership demands adept management of political and professional dynamics, often beyond one's direct influence. Moreover, the selection and evaluation process of literacy programs described by participants illustrated substantial variations, with diverse "curriculum-ish" approaches being employed. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further complicated matters, severely impacting curriculum leaders' ability to navigate compliance frameworks while ensuring equitable access to literacy education. Notably, curriculum leaders across Long Island demonstrated varied prioritization of federal and state mandates and accountability structures, shaping their interpretations and descriptions of their roles in diverse ways. Ultimately, findings suggest the need for curriculum leaders to prioritize building capacity to effectively navigate and dismantle political barriers that hinder the provision of equitable educational opportunities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Social cohesion and economic freedom have long been held as essential components of a successful educational system in the United States, with these ideals woven into the fabric of educational policies dating back to the nation's inception (McGuinn, 2016). Despite such intentions, a persistent disconnection between policy objectives and tangible reform outcomes can be seen throughout history (Sahlberg, 2012). To fully grasp the landscape of American education, one must confront the ongoing struggle between advocates for a hierarchical social order and those who challenge and seek to rectify systemic flaws. Throughout history, structural inequities and exclusionary practices have been perpetuated by those in positions of authority to justify and maintain social hierarchies within educational institutions (Neem, 2017). Fuller and Stevenson (2019) posit that educational policymakers, despite their professed intentions, often struggle to reconcile traditional democratic values with actions that ultimately serve the interests of the social elite. Regardless of the rhetoric surrounding equity-focused policy reforms, the persistence of policies that favor certain groups while erecting barriers for others perpetuates structural inequities.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 5 delves into a thorough discussion synthesizing the multifaceted landscape of educational policy, practice, and the lived experiences of district-level literacy curriculum leaders. Grounded in historical context, the chapter navigates the persistent struggle between aspirations for social cohesion and economic freedom within the American educational system. It highlights the perpetual discord between policy intentions and tangible outcomes, tracing back to entrenched structural inequities perpetuated by those in positions of authority. The current qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study offers insights into the complexities faced by

curriculum leaders in selecting and implementing literacy programs. Through a fusion approach to data analysis, the researcher scrutinizes participant responses, revealing disparities in perceptions of roles and duties among curriculum leaders across demographically diverse districts in Long Island, NY. Several vital implications and recommendations for policy and practice include the pressing need for equitable policy frameworks in the post-pandemic era, advocating for flexibility, transparency, and investments in professional development initiatives tailored to the evolving needs of students across Long Island. Moreover, it underscores the importance of critical educational leadership practices, urging curriculum leaders to systematically prioritize social justice and equity in English as a New Language (ENL) and special education services. Additionally, the chapter calls for revisions in higher education curricula to better prepare future curriculum leaders and teachers, emphasizing evidence-based practices in literacy instruction and comprehensive training opportunities.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to assess the effectiveness of interventions addressing disparities in curriculum leader roles, examining how institutional culture shapes curriculum priorities and strategies for challenging entrenched traditions to promote educational equity. Additionally, research should focus on evaluating the alignment between teacher preparation programs and the demands of literacy instruction, exploring innovative approaches for enhancing parental engagement, and investigating the impact of COVID-19-related funding on equity in literacy education. Chapter 5 comprehensively explores the challenges, implications, and recommendations for advancing equity and excellence in literacy education within the intricate web of educational policy and practice.

STUDY SUMMARY

The literature review in the present study critically analyzed the rhetoric in decades of education policies, including the most recent policy reforms claiming to prioritize equitable outcomes for all students. Research indicates that underlying every educational policy in the past century, beyond the motives outlined in any political agendas or accountability frameworks, and central to equity efforts, lies a fundamental issue: the values and beliefs (GERM) upheld by those in positions of authority (Carey et al., 2023; Cross, 2004; Dulude & Milley, 2021; Sahlburg, 2012). Despite extensive research demonstrating how educational policy reforms perpetuate a harmful cycle of accountability, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring how literacy curriculum leaders, as key actors in the political landscape, perceive and negotiate the complexities of this cycle to make informed decisions about curriculum programs. Stakeholders' perspectives have been underrepresented in existing research on critical educational issues in the United States. It highlights the importance of understanding how elementary-level curriculum leaders in Long Island, NY, conceptualize their role and navigate the accountability structures when making equitable decisions regarding literacy curricula that align with district objectives.

The researcher employed a phenomenological inquiry to better understand Literacy Curriculum Leader Roles and their perception of how institutional structures present challenges. Using a purposeful sampling technique allowed the researcher to obtain participants from demographically diverse districts across Long Island. A Fusion approach to data analysis allowed the researcher to merge descriptions with interpretations. Findings included notable disparities in perceptions and delineations of roles and duties among curriculum leaders. In addition, findings suggest that mastery of curriculum leadership demands adeptly navigating an array of political and professional factors, often beyond direct influence. Moreover, diverse

approaches with a "curriculum-ish" nature were evident in selecting and evaluating literacy programs. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic markedly impacted curriculum leaders' ability to harmonize compliance frameworks with equitable literacy education. Across Long Island, curriculum leaders attribute distinct priorities to the influence of federal and state mandates and accountability structures, shaping their definitions and descriptions of their roles.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

An analysis of qualitative data gathered in this phenomenological inquiry revealed numerous noteworthy discoveries that contribute to ongoing research and hold ramifications for prospective educational policy and equitable practice.

Role Clarity

The disparities among curriculum leaders in their understanding and definitions of roles underscore curriculum leadership's intricate and unequal nature. The varied titles and job descriptions among these leaders highlight the multifaceted nature of literacy curriculum leadership across Long Island. While each leader brings their unique perspective and expertise, institutional structures often impose barriers beyond their control, perpetuating inequities. As the education landscape evolves, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, it is crucial to recognize these differences and promote equitable policies in selecting and evaluating literacy curricula. The disparities observed among curriculum leaders in their perceptions and delineations of their roles and duties have significant implications for current practice and future education research. As the field of education evolves, particularly in the post-pandemic era, it becomes crucial to recognize these disparities and strive for a more uniform definition of a curriculum leader role as well as equitable policies concerning the selection and evaluation of literacy curricula.

Teacher Preparedness

School District Leaders and teacher education preparation programs must address how to tailor preparatory courses to specifically address the role and responsibilities of a curriculum leader to ensure effective leadership and decision-making in curriculum matters. The need for clarity surrounding the essential duties of curriculum leaders in New York State is compounded by uncertainty regarding the interpretation and definition of curriculum within both policy and practice. Addressing these disparities may involve conducting comprehensive assessments of the roles and responsibilities of curriculum leaders at the institutional level, identifying areas of inconsistency, and implementing measures to promote more significant alignment and clarity in these roles. Additionally, there is a pressing need for professional development opportunities tailored to curriculum leaders' diverse needs and challenges. Training programs should not only focus on technical skills but also on fostering leadership qualities and addressing systemic barriers to equity in curriculum decision-making.

Curriculum Leaders and teachers who enter the field prepared would allow curriculum leaders to remain vigilant in upholding professional standards, advocating for evidence-based practices, and prioritizing the best interests of students amidst external pressures. This can be accomplished by engaging external experts, providing continuous support, and fostering collaboration among educators to ensure comprehensive training and ongoing professional growth. Ylimaki (2011) delineated the obstacles facing curriculum leaders amidst a political climate preoccupied with race- and class-based achievement disparities. Federal and state education institutions must provide curriculum leaders with adequate support, professional development opportunities, and collaborative structures to effectively manage their diverse roles and responsibilities.

District Funding and Resources

The findings of this study shed light on several challenges curriculum leaders face in managing their roles effectively. These challenges have significant implications for current educational practice and future research. For example, the need for more consistency in teaching methods, materials, and curricular programs across schools and classrooms presents a significant barrier to student learning and equitable access to education. Resource limitations and funding uncertainty challenge the implementation and sustainability of curriculum initiatives, professional development programs, and support services. Institutional traditions and cultural norms influence curriculum decision-making processes and may hinder efforts to adopt innovative approaches aligned with contemporary best practices. Curriculum leaders face multifaceted responsibilities that require balancing instructional leadership, administrative duties, resource management, and stakeholder engagement.

COVID-19 had an immense impact on literacy curriculum decisions and revealed several implications for current educational practice. It is imperative for future research to address the effect on curriculum decisions. The disparities in how districts allocate COVID-related funding highlight curriculum leaders' challenges in balancing compliance structures with equity in literacy education. Curriculum leaders must navigate evolving institutional policies and mandates while addressing the diverse needs of students and educators. The need for targeted professional development and support for educators, particularly in areas such as technology integration, assessment literacy, and meeting the needs of diverse student populations, is evident. The battle between accountability measures and the provision of equitable educational opportunities highlights the need for a balanced approach to assessment practices. The findings highlight disparities in curriculum decision-making processes and resource allocation across

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districts, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to address systemic barriers to educational equity.

Parent and Community Engagement

In addition, findings suggest many challenges curriculum leaders face in fostering meaningful parental and community engagement. These challenges have significant implications for current educational practice and highlight the need for further research to address these complex issues. Curriculum leaders encounter unique obstacles in reaching and engaging parents in their children's learning journey, particularly in diverse communities with varying levels of parental involvement. It is also imperative that curriculum leaders employ strategies that promote two-way communication between parents and educators, foster collaboration between home and school, and address barriers to parental participation. In an equitable educational system, a transformational leader must adopt a new paradigm with a shared vision by all stakeholders, fostering open communication, mutual empowerment, and ongoing commitment to a collective vision (Aguas, 2020; Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Crawford et al., 1997; Daniels, 2004; Dugan & Humbles, 2018). This can be accomplished by engaging in open dialogue with community stakeholders, providing transparent communication about curriculum decisions, and upholding professional standards in addressing controversial issues. Accomplishing this would mean establishing a culture of collaboration and partnership between parents and educators, providing opportunities for meaningful engagement and feedback.

Politics

Amidst the ongoing influence of the current political landscape on education at all levels, particular attention has been drawn to the K-12 curriculum. In the current study, participants demonstrated an acute awareness of how localized politics intersected with their roles as

curriculum leaders, a dynamic especially pronounced in districts with racially and culturally diverse student populations. While aspiring to select and implement curricula that catered to the diverse needs of students to foster educational equity, curriculum leaders encountered challenges in translating these aspirations into practice, often resorting to adopting neutral curricular programs to minimize resistance and safeguard their positions.

Negotiating community perceptions and controversies surrounding curriculum content, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LGBTQ+ representation, proved to be additional hurdles impacting decision-making and curriculum adoption processes. For instance, Beth Jenkins from District A recounted an incident where a parent raised concerns about the district considering a CRT curriculum. In response, the Superintendent proactively directed classroom teachers to remove a specific book title from shelves, which was part of the adopted curriculum. Jenkins explained, "The Superintendents went crazy because Lucy Caulkins put out a book about a family that was going to the Gay Pride parade in New York City." Despite not receiving direct opposition regarding this book title, the Superintendent preemptively removed it from the curriculum due to anticipated pushback from parents. This reaction aligns with the study's findings, indicating Curriculum Leaders' struggles in devising strategies to address curriculum content barriers amid community resistance.

Similarly, Francis from District G recounted his efforts to involve parents in community collaboration opportunities to enhance literacy as a home-school connection. Reflecting on his experience in the NYC school system, he expressed greater ease initiating conversations with parents about supporting literacy at home. However, when considering the affluent demographics of his current district, he remarked, "I think the parents in this community would be insulted by the term 'parent developer.' I think they would say, 'I'm not a stupid parent; I don't

need to be developed for the school.'" This realization prompted Francis to reassess his approach

and terminology, acknowledging the potential presumption and insensitivity of the term "parent

development." He concluded that parents in his community might refuse to embrace such

language. Francis' contemplation on the differing approaches to parent engagement based on

district demographics suggests a hesitancy and uncertainty in practicing a universally equitable

approach to stakeholder engagement, driven by apprehensions about potential personal

repercussions.

Giving in to institutional pressures and political concerns poses a significant threat to the

integrity of curriculum decisions, potentially leading to compromises that undermine the quality

and equity of education. Curriculum leaders must rise above superficial parental involvement

and instead actively engage in authentic dialogues. By doing so, they can cultivate an

environment of mutual learning, tapping into parents' diverse perspectives and experiences to

enrich the educational process. This approach promotes equity and strengthens the integrity of

curriculum decisions, ensuring educational principles rather than external pressures guide them.

Curriculum Processes

Findings suggest that disparities in literacy program selection and implementation

processes emphasize several implications for current educational practice and warrant the need

for future research. The term "curriculum-ish" reflects a common ambiguity among educators

regarding the distinction between curriculum, program, and standards. This highlights the need

for clarity in terminology and a deeper understanding of these concepts among curriculum

leaders and educators. The formation of literacy committees represents a promising approach to

involve stakeholders in selecting and implementing literacy programs. However, committee

objectives and operations disparities highlight the importance of standardizing processes and

promoting collaboration. The tension between preserving academic autonomy and implementing a consistent literacy program underscores the importance of balancing equity and effectiveness across districts. Challenges related to program implementation, such as teacher buy-in and understanding, highlight the need for targeted support and professional development initiatives.

Curriculum leaders should establish and leverage collaborative structures, such as curriculum committees, to facilitate communication, decision-making, and implementation of literacy initiatives. Clear communication and ongoing dialogue can help mitigate misconceptions and foster a shared understanding of critical concepts. Ball (2008) argued that curriculum links a person to society and culture. Since curriculum is the conduit for implementing ideas and is the central focus of American education, a system in a constant state of perpetual reform driven by political agenda, Curriculum Leaders must lead from a transformative lens. Chan et al. (2022) argue that the relationship between curriculum and instructional leaders needs more clarity and strength due to the historical tendency to conceptualize curriculum as distinct from pedagogical practice. In addition, curriculum leaders' clear objectives for literacy committees would ensure diverse representation from stakeholders and provide adequate support and resources for committee members. During committee discussions about the benefits of consistency in literacy instruction, curriculum leaders need to respect the need for academic autonomy. Clear communication about the rationale behind program selection can help garner support and buy-in from educators, build leadership capacity, excite teachers about new initiatives, and provide ongoing support and training to ensure successful program implementation.

Educational Inequity

Universal, equitable policies in literacy curriculum decisions emerged as a finding that highlighted several implications for current educational practice. Future research to address

universally equitable policies must understand their impact better. Curriculum leaders must prioritize fostering inclusive opportunities for all students, particularly those experiencing disparities in access to equitable curricula, such as English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities. Curriculum leaders encounter systemic barriers, such as limited resources, siloed approaches, and ableist mindsets, which hinder efforts to promote educational equity. Implementing universally equitable programs, such as Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT), requires careful consideration of resources, teacher training, and stakeholder buy-in to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Curriculum leaders must challenge existing norms and refrain from making assumptions rooted in stereotypes, particularly regarding the needs and capabilities of diverse student populations.

Leadership and Accountability Frameworks for Critical Interpretation

Using a critical leadership theoretical framework to interpret findings involves analyzing the data through the lens of power dynamics, social justice, and equity. This approach examines how leadership practices and decisions perpetuate or challenge existing power structures and inequalities within educational settings. Transformative strategies for leadership that promote social justice and equity include advocating for policy changes, implementing inclusive decision-making processes, and prioritizing the needs of marginalized groups. Using a critical leadership theoretical framework to interpret findings, this research uncovered underlying power dynamics, identified areas for improvement, and proposed strategies for transformative change toward greater social justice and equity in educational leadership practices.

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UNANTICIPATED FINDING

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This study's most notable and unexpected finding was the vast disparities observed among districts in implementing special education and English as a New Language (ENL)

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services. Disparities included how they describe, prioritize, and evaluate special education and English as a New Language (ENL) or Dual Language services. Particularly striking was the practice by some districts to provide ICT classes as part of an inclusive, least restrictive environment in some of the schools in their district, but only in some. For example, when asked about the need for ICT classes in the other elementary schools in the same district, Whitman from District C stated, "Of course, we have a need for it, but having ICT classes at every school in our district is very expensive." Whitman offered a flippant gesture during this discussion segment, which suggested that adding ICT sections was not a priority. Similarly, Morris from District E, although expressing a desire to incite change in how services are provided in her district, also described an inability to meet the needs of ELLs who have an IEP and are entitled to special education services. She explained the challenge of working in a small school district with limited resources that require her to determine which service an ELL with disabilities would "benefit more from." This is problematic on all levels.

For example, the hegemonic practice of dominance or influence exerted by one group over others, often through power, authority, or control, can be used to describe the practice of some districts denying access to ENL and Special Education services. When asked to describe how his district prioritizes access to least restrictive Individualized Education Program (IEP) services, he explained that access to ICT is primarily based on students' residential addresses rather than through the Committee on Special Education (CSE) process, as stipulated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Thus, if you live on "Avenue A," are scheduled to attend "School A," and have an IEP that outlines ICT as the best setting to meet your educational needs, you will receive that service. Consequently, students attending other elementary schools within the same district who require Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) services

are denied access to these opportunities solely based on their residential addresses. Thus, if you are assigned to a different school based on where you live but have similar learning needs that necessitate ICT, you will be denied access to that service. Moreover, students transitioning from the one elementary school that offered ICT to a middle school within District C may experience a shift from a least restrictive environment to a more restrictive one due to the preliminary stage of ICT program implementation at the secondary level.

Curriculum Leaders in districts that employ an unequal distribution of ENL and Special Education services that result in exclusive practices also describe teacher collaboration and preparedness challenges. This blaring connection between exclusive practices and lack of consistency warrants further investigation. Co-teaching practices such as co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing foster a shared responsibility for student learning. These are apparent downfalls in districts that deny access to these services. Unless educational leaders in Long Island districts prioritize the creation of a universally equitable system to eliminate barriers and guarantee fair access to education, the prevailing narrative will persist: the American education system serves to advantage certain groups while marginalizing others.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Equitable Policy

Considering the unique challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19, curriculum leaders must prioritize flexibility and adaptability in decision-making processes and adapting collaborative approaches involving stakeholders. Advocacy for equitable resource allocation would ensure all students access essential technology, programs, and support services. Clear communication and transparent decision-making processes can help address concerns about resource distribution. Moreover, the need to prioritize investments in professional development

initiatives that address the evolving needs of educators in the context of COVID-19 and beyond is imminent. Tailored support programs can empower educators to navigate challenges and implement evidence-based practices effectively.

Equitable assessment practices prioritizing growth, equity, and inclusivity while meeting compliance requirements are challenging for curriculum leaders. However, transparent communication about assessment goals and outcomes can help foster understanding and support among stakeholders and enhance efforts to identify and address systemic barriers to educational equity, including disparities in funding, access to resources, and support services. Curriculum Leaders must advocate for policy changes to help advance equity initiatives by demanding that politicians who claim to emphasize stricter organizational accountability structures while purportedly prioritizing equitable access to high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students are held accountable for consistently falling short of fulfilling and sustaining the intended commitments (Carey et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dulude & Milley, 2021).

In addition, curriculum leaders must advocate for meaningful interventions that facilitate student progress rather than merely procedural ones. This requires a focus on addressing disparities in resources and opportunities and leveraging collaborative opportunities among stakeholders to ensure equitable outcomes. To actively break down systemic barriers within their districts, including addressing funding inequities, promoting collaboration among stakeholders, and challenging ableist attitudes and practices, clear and consistent descriptions of curriculum leader roles across districts are required. To ensure access to high-quality education for all students, curriculum leaders must advocate for fully implementing universally equitable programs across all schools within their district. Another critical recommendation is that

curriculum leaders foster a culture of inclusivity and equity within their districts by promoting awareness, sensitivity, and understanding of diverse student needs.

Defining the Role of a Curriculum Leader

The results of the current study underscore the critical necessity for New York State to clearly define the responsibilities of a curriculum leader. Higher education institutions must design curricula that equip curriculum leaders to lead with a transformative and critical outlook, irrespective of the district they serve. A critical educational leader must approach inequitable practices regarding English as a New Language (ENL) and special education services in a public elementary school by employing a multifaceted and proactive approach to address systemic barriers and promote equity for all students. Wallace and Hoyle (2005) argued that curriculum leaders who operate as part of an equitable education system must transition from a radical transformation ideology aimed at policy reform to adopt a systematic approach that prioritizes attaining social justice. In critically examining existing practices, a critical leader must comprehensively assess the current English as a New Language (ENL) and special education services within the school district. This involves meticulously scrutinizing the access, resources, support, and outcomes available to ENL and special education students. The examination should delve into various facets, such as student performance, program enrollment, resource allocation, and the adequacy of teacher training.

In addition, engaging stakeholders is a crucial step in a critical leader's approach. Actively involving teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members fosters a collaborative environment where diverse perspectives and insights can be gathered regarding ENL and special education services. This inclusive engagement lays the groundwork for collective problem-solving and decision-making processes. With a focus on equity-centered

policy and practice development, a critical leader must collaborate with stakeholders to devise and implement policies and practices that prioritize equity and inclusivity in ENL and special education services. This may entail overhauling curriculum frameworks, ensuring more equitable resource distribution, providing targeted professional development opportunities for teachers, and implementing evidence-based interventions and supports. Critical Curriculum Leaders must advocate for ENL and special education students within the school, district, and broader community. They must be empowered to question policies and demand resources that support their diverse needs and rights. Additionally, critical leaders must forge partnerships with external agencies, community organizations, and advocacy groups to garner additional support and resources for ELL and special education programs.

Considering the findings highlighting the numerous responsibilities confronting curriculum leaders, districts should acknowledge the impracticality of expecting a single entity to manage curriculum selection, implementation, and evaluation across the K-12 spectrum, given the diverse needs at each level. One strategy to address this challenge and promote consistency in curriculum leadership across districts is establishing teams comprising directors, coaches, and lead teachers at each educational level. Districts that rely solely on an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction to oversee all K-12 curriculum matters are unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes. Instead, at the district level, the Assistant Superintendent should facilitate a curriculum leadership team that includes directors, coaches, and lead teachers to ensure equitable curriculum practices benefiting students at all levels.

Extensive research highlights policymakers' persistent challenge in achieving equitable change through policy reform. Despite efforts to remove barriers to learning, increasingly rigid accountability structures hinder sustained equitable opportunities. Concrete systematic measures

are imperative to foster lasting equitable policy reform, ideally initiated at the highest level.

While some advocate for a radical restructuring of the education system, such drastic measures

may yield only a short time. However, curriculum leaders can effect meaningful change within

their current authority by challenging norms perpetuating social hierarchy and implementing

local policies to disrupt inequitable outcomes. Addressing challenges in stakeholder engagement

during curriculum selection can be tackled by developing effective community involvement

strategies. Curriculum leaders must prioritize representing the diverse needs of all students in

their decision-making processes.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Multiple sources of qualitative data collection can help researchers triangulate data to

ensure its validity and reliability as it is reported and interpreted (Bhattacharya, 2017). Using

various collection methods allowed the researcher to develop thick descriptions of the

phenomenon being studied. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), combining data

collection methods is an imperative qualitative strategy to establish the validity and reliability of

findings. Strategies for achieving valid and reliable findings include using interview protocols,

peer review, and member checking. Each data collection phase was thoroughly documented in a

researcher journal, and interview transcripts were shared with participants during the last data

collection phase to ensure the accuracy of intended responses.

Instrumental in advancing hermeneutic phenomenology, Heidegger (1982) moved data

analysis from descriptive to interpretive. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) described interpretive

hermeneutic phenomenology as a perspective that "recognizes that human existence is always

embedded within a world of meanings" (p. 54). Therefore, while hermeneutic researchers are

expected to bracket their own experiences during data collection phases to gain the highest level

of understanding of participant experiences, it is also essential to recognize that all humans are situated in various social, historical, and contextual worlds. Aguas (2022) stated that detailed descriptions and in-depth interpretations require honesty and objectivity to minimize researcher and participant bias.

LIMITATIONS

Hermeneutic phenomenology is conceptualized by significant scholars who have adopted this school of thought to better understand others by exploring ways they are situated in social, historical, and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While transcendental phenomenology focuses on describing the lived experience of a person or group of people, more interpretive findings are needed. Conversely, hermeneutics focuses on developing thick descriptions of participant experiences through an iterative process to create a deeper worldly understanding that the researcher can apply to an individual with a richer understanding (Van Manen, 1990). However, critics of a hermeneutic approach might argue that interpretations are limited by a researcher's ability to achieve a deeper understanding while bracketing personal beliefs and assumptions (Bhattacharya, 2017). Since phenomenological data analysis does not follow a prescribed process to attain in-depth understanding, perhaps findings are subjective and situated within the researcher's conceptualization of the explicit idea and interpretative process.

Unlike quantitative research that uses measures of population samples to ensure reliability, it is typical for qualitative phenomenological studies to include 6-10 participants, in this study 7, who share the experience of a phenomenon. Each phase of data collection during this study relied on participant availability. One limitation was the lack of participant availability during the focus group session. Four of seven participants were in attendance, preventing comprehensive data collection. Employing diverse qualitative data collection methods enabled

the researcher to triangulate data, ensuring its trustworthiness as reported and interpreted (Bhattacharya, 2017). Utilizing various collection techniques enabled the researcher to craft comprehensive descriptions of how curriculum leaders navigate accountability structures while engaging in their roles. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), integrating multiple data collection methods is essential in qualitative research to establish trustworthy findings. Strategies to attain trustworthy results include employing interview protocols and conducting member checking. Each data collection stage was meticulously documented, and pertinent excerpts from interview transcripts were shared with participants during the final phase to confirm the accuracy of their responses.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research can begin by delving into practical strategies for promoting consistency in curriculum implementation, examining how teacher autonomy, resource limitations, and institutional constraints influence program fidelity. Additionally, investigating the long-term effects of funding fluctuations on curriculum quality, teacher morale, and student outcomes could provide insights into leveraging limited resources for maximum educational impact. Exploring the role of institutional culture in shaping curriculum priorities, including strategies for challenging entrenched traditions and understanding the impact of cultural change on educational equity and excellence, warrants further investigation.

Moreover, examining the alignment between teacher preparation programs and the demands of literacy instruction in K-12 settings, alongside strategies for bridging the gap between theory and practice in teacher education, could inform more effective educator training. Further research could explore the effectiveness of various professional development models in sustaining long-term professional growth in literacy instruction and assess the impact of

leadership development programs, mentorship initiatives, and organizational structures on enhancing curriculum leaders' capacity to meet evolving school and community needs. Innovative approaches for enhancing parental engagement, such as technology integration and culturally responsive practices, also merit exploration to bridge the gap between home and school. Investigating the influence of community perceptions on curriculum implementation and strategies for promoting inclusive and culturally responsive education could contribute to fostering equitable learning environments.

Additionally, exploring the impact of institutional rhetoric and political pressures on curriculum decision-making, alongside strategies for promoting integrity and autonomy in curriculum leadership, could shed light on effective governance practices. Further research could examine the root causes of misconceptions surrounding curriculum selection and explore strategies for improving educators' conceptual understanding to enhance decision-making processes. Exploring the effectiveness of different models of literacy committees and identifying barriers to collaboration within committees could inform better committee structures and decision-making processes. Investigating Curriculum Leader and teacher perceptions toward program consistency and strategies for mitigating resistance to change and examining the impact of COVID-19-related funding on equity in literacy education are also crucial avenues for future research. Additionally, exploring adaptive strategies curriculum leaders employ during crises, assessing the impact of policy shifts, and investigating best practices for maintaining educational equity amidst changing circumstances could provide valuable insights. Further research could also evaluate the efficacy of professional development programs during crises, explore the impact of technology integration on teaching and learning outcomes, and investigate strategies for promoting cultural responsiveness and inclusivity in literacy instruction.

Examining the impact of accountability measures on curriculum decision-making processes, exploring alternative assessment models, and addressing disparities in decision-making processes and educational equity outcomes are essential for promoting systemic change in literacy education. Moreover, investigating systemic barriers to educational equity, assessing the impact of interventions promoting inclusivity, and identifying strategies for successfully implementing universally equitable programs are critical areas for future research. Finally, examining the prevalence of assumptions and stereotypes within educational systems and identifying strategies for promoting cultural competence and inclusivity among curriculum leaders and educators could contribute to fostering more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, addressing the challenges identified in this study requires collaborative efforts from educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all students. Curriculum leaders are pivotal in driving educational excellence and equity through implementing evidence-based practices, advocating for sustainable funding sources, and cultivating a culture centered on innovation and continual enhancement. As gatekeepers of educational equity, they are tasked with navigating the intricate dynamics of institutional contexts while prioritizing student success and growth. Future research endeavors should persist in delving into the nuanced interplay between institutional contexts, leadership practices, and student outcomes. By furthering our understanding of these complex dynamics, researchers can inform evidence-based policies and practices that propel educational systems toward more significant equity and excellence, ensuring every student receives a high-quality education. If future research neglects to address this nuanced interplay, a cycle

perpetuated by GERM will continue to yield an education system that falls short of its intended promises. Without a comprehensive understanding of these complex dynamics, the ongoing and complex struggle to develop effective strategies and interventions to promote educational equity and excellence will continue to result in unsustainable education reform, continued disparities in student achievement, limited progress in addressing systemic barriers to learning, and missed opportunities for innovation and improvement. In essence, failing to address these critical interconnections could hinder the advancement of educational outcomes for all students and impede efforts to create more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TABLES
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT JOURNAL
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1 - INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2 - FOCUS GROUP
APPENDIX F: MEMBER CHECK QUESTIONNAIRE

Table 1

Data Collection Procedures

Phase	Researcher Role	Participant Role
Phase I: Questionnaire *The questionnaire was designed to collect profile and demographic data, including title and years of experience as an ELA curriculum leader. *To ensure alignment with a qualitative research design, the questionnaire included a few open-ended questions to elicit perceptions and personal experiences. It gave the researcher insight that helped when developing open-ended questions.	*Contacted participants via email or phone to review the purpose of this study. *A copy of the signed consent form outlining confidentiality and anonymity procedures was forwarded via email. *Forwarded questionnaire with a preferred date of completion. *Followed up via email or phone to schedule individual semi-structured interviews.	*Confirmed consent of signed agreement. *Completed questionnaire and returned by requested completion date. *Informed researcher of availability for interview.

Phase II: Semi-Structured Interviews

*Upon receiving consent from participants, the researcher will mail a participant journal with detailed intentions and a solicited prompt to bring to the focus group.

*The researcher will have a set of guiding open-ended questions prepared.

*The interview will last approximately 50-60 minutes

*Interviews will be recorded and transcripts uploaded to Dedoose software for coding.

*Explain the purpose of the interview and convey to participants that they are free to share information freely during the interview.

*Establish a rapport by briefly sharing personal information about family or general work experience.

*Inform participants that interviews will be recorded and obtain their consent.

*Specific topics will guide questions and will serve as an outline.

*Allow themes to develop naturally.

*Following research questions, invite participants to share their experiences while avoiding leading comments or questions.

*Invite participants to add to their previously solicited journal prompts and bring them to the focus group.

*Answer questions with relevant experience.

*Answer honestly.

*Share any additional information at any time during the interview.

*Be honest if feeling uncomfortable and ask questions to clarify.

Phase III: Focus Groups

*A Focus group will be a gathering of participants on-site or virtually.

*The focus group session will occur within two weeks of individual interviews

*The focus group session will last approximately one hour.

*Establish a rapport and thank participants for coming together virtually or in person.

*Explain the purpose of a focus group and the rationale for coming together as participants in this study.

*Review the journal's intention and invite participants to share their solicited entries.

*While participants share responses to previously solicited prompts, the researcher will input responses live into an online application, "Answer Garden."

*After responses are imputed and shared on a smartboard, participants will be asked to share their interpretations while the researcher records notes in the researcher's journal.

*Participate in discussion.

*Share relevant information about your experience.

*Be honest if feeling uncomfortable and ask questions to clarify.

*Try solicited journal entries in any format chosen.

*Journal freely.

*Participate in idea sharing using an online application, "Answer Garden."

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| Phase IV: Final Questionnaire | *Responses to this questionnaire will be uploaded to Dedoose and coded using In-vivo coding. | *As co-researchers, participants will review raw data to ensure accuracy and answer final open-ended questions. |

Phase IV: Final Questionnaire

*The researcher will develop a Google Forms questionnaire, including a few open-ended questions.

*Questions will also ask them to verify the accuracy of their statements by sharing raw data.

*Responses to this questionnaire will be uploaded to Dedoose and coded using In-vivo coding.

*As co-researchers, participants will review raw data to ensure accuracy and answer final open-ended questions.

Table 2

Seven Components in Data Collection and Analysis: A Fusion Approach

Component	Fusion Approach Defined (Aguas, 2022, pp. 6-8)	Application to Current Study
Emphasis	The merging of universal truths and the restructure of understandings (fore-having, foresight, and fore-conception) is central to true and deep knowledge.	The researcher kept a reflective journal to describe universal truths about the phenomenon's essence and interpret curriculum leaders' lived experiences in context. This non-linear data analysis approach focuses on the phenomenon. It allows the researcher to bracket preconceptions during interviews while authentically reflecting on each stage of the data collection process using journal entries.
Researcher and object of study	The duality between the object of study and the researcher is paramount, as the inquirer's perspective lacks personal values and biases. At the same time, they sustain the participants' interpretations of the phenomenon being studied.	A Focus Group was conducted to facilitate understanding of curriculum leaders' lived experiences and promote discussion of diverse perspectives between researcher and participants. Participants were invited to engage in solicited reflective journaling. The researcher will be an active and neutral participant.
Intentionality, consciousness, and intuition	A balance between description and interpretation is sought to sustain a sense of epistemological and methodological neutrality while acknowledging the researcher's and research participants' contribution to knowledge generation.	In addition to the first round of interviews, in which the researcher adhered to a semi-structured interview protocol, the researcher conducted a focus group to discuss raw data. Emergent theories from these interactions are included in the final results of this study.

Radical autonomy and situated meaning	There is a negotiated attitude toward addressing the phenomenon under scrutiny and autonomy and openness to change to produce accurate and more profound knowledge.	Data collection sources included interviews, focus groups, and reflective journaling, intentionally selected to elicit detailed phenomenological descriptions of curriculum leaders' lived experiences while providing opportunities to reflect and interpret data.
Constitutionality and co-constitutionality	There is a blend between the researcher's use of bracketing and the participants' structure understandings to build knowledge based on cocreations; however, the researcher avoids a biasing effect on the participants' views implicit in their narratives.	Feedback from participants and participant journals during the focus group was interwoven with the authenticity of researcher insights from reflective journaling while ensuring validity and reliability by bracketing.
Cognitive and noncognitive meaning	Entanglement of the natural reality and the transcendental attitude occurs in describing and interpreting the phenomenon under study using representational and subjective language (evocative, expressive, and transcendental).	Emerging themes, understandings of the researcher and the participants, and descriptions of eidetic structures (essential components of the phenomenon) were combined to describe and interpret various aspects of curriculum leaders' experience.

| Rigor of research | A clear definition of scientific rigor and contextual criteria ensure the description of universal essences and the trustworthiness of co-created interpretations. | Using an iterative analysis, the researcher provided a description and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied, how curriculum leaders perceive organizational accountability, and their experience navigating the structures when making decisions about literacy curricula. |

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Title/Level	District/County	Years in Education	Years as CL
Beth Jenkins	44	White	F	K-12 Coordinator of Reading/AIS/RTI	A/Suffolk	21-25 years	11-15 years
Wendy Snyder	60	White	F	Director of Elementary Curriculum and Assessment	B/Suffolk	>25 years	<5 years
Peter Whitman	57	White	M	Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	C/Nassau	>25 years	<5 years
Robert Pace	48	White	M	Assistant Superintendent of Instruction	D/Nassau	>25 years	6-10 years
Cathy Morris	42	White	F	Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum	E/Suffolk	21-25 years	<5 years
Connie Ian	50	White	F	Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction	F/Suffolk	>25 years	<5 years
Michael Francis	62	White	M	Assistant of Curriculum, Instruction, and Personnel	G/Nassau	>25 years	<5 years

Table 4

District Demographics

District	County	K-5 Enrollment	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Economically Disadvantaged
District A	Suffolk	1,812	75%	1%	18%	12%
District B	Suffolk	3,865	30%	15%	47%	65%
District C	Nassau	2,330	61%	1%	22%	18%
District D	Nassau	1,811	9%	45%	35%	2%
District E	Suffolk	589	68%	3%	24%	36%
District F	Suffolk	3,237	2%	12%	82%	84%
District G	Nassau	1,267	52%	3%	9%	7%

Note. Retrieved from NYS Department of Education (2023)

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Establishing Background and Participant Demographics

Brief Description: The following questionnaire will be emailed to participants after signed consent to participate has been received. The questionnaire aims to gather general information on demographics and participant background. Upon completion and receipt of the questionnaire, each participant will receive a detailed letter describing the purpose of the enclosed journal.

For all respondents (via email): Thank you for returning the signed consent form agreeing to participate in this research study for my doctoral dissertation. Attached is a questionnaire that you can complete and submit electronically. Please return the questionnaire within a week of receipt. Completing the questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes. It will provide me with some general information about you, your job title, experience, role/responsibilities, and district demographics for which you are employed. Your name and the district's name will not be shared, but instead, you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your anonymity.

1. Your name
2. Age
3. Race/Ethnicity
4. Gender
5. District
6. County
7. What is your current title?
8. How many years have you been employed in the field of education?
9. What was your title before becoming a curriculum leader?
10. How many years have you been employed as a curriculum leader?
11. How long have you been a curriculum leader in your current district?
12. Do you serve as a K-12, K-6, or other district leader?
13. Are you responsible for curriculum selection?
14. Are you responsible for curriculum adoption?
15. Are you responsible for curriculum evaluation?

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT JOURNAL

Solicited Journal Response Prompts

Brief Description: The following letter will be mailed to all participants after each participant has submitted the questionnaire. The letter will explain the purpose of the journal and directions for use. Participants will be prompted to bring their journals and responses to the focus group meeting.

Dear (Participant's Name),

Thank you for consenting to participate in my research study for my doctoral dissertation and for responding to the questionnaire via email. Enclosed is a participant journal that I would like you to use for responses to the solicited prompts on each page. Each page is blank except for the prompt at the top. Please respond to the prompt in any format you are comfortable with. Some examples of journal formats include but are not limited to a bulleted list, a word cloud, a diagram, a chart, and sketches (or any combination of these). If you have a preferred format for journaling, please feel free to use it.

Within a week after conducting the last individual interviews with each participant, I will contact you to establish a mutually convenient time for all participants to meet for a focus group session. Preferably, we will meet in person at a mutually agreed upon site. If unable to coordinate a site for an in-person focus group, a virtual meeting will be arranged. Please bring your journal with all solicited responses to this focus group discussion, as you will use it to guide group discussion. Journals will be collected and combined with other data sources (questionnaires, individual and focus group interview transcripts, and researcher journal/analytic memos).

As discussed before consent, there are no known risks associated with the study, and the expected benefit of participating is the advancement of knowledge and understanding of qualitative research. You will be notified of findings and allowed to verify that all raw data represents your experience. This study will not reference or link your identity to individual responses. However, you will be assigned a fictitious name or a unique identifier. As the returned signed consent form outlines, pseudonyms for participant names and site locations will ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Any electronic files used to collect and analyze data will be locked and inaccessible to anyone except the researcher. Finally, if at any time during this study, you decide you no longer wish to participate, please be aware that you can choose to back out at any time. If you have any questions before the meeting, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for being a part of this research study.

Sincerely,
Mary Pettit

Ed.D Candidate, Molly University

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1 - INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Establishing Context and Exploring Participant's Experience

For all respondents: Thank you for consenting to participate in the research study I will be conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation. You were selected to participate because of your current curriculum leader position in a Long Island public school. I am interested in developing a deeper understanding of your lived experience in selecting and evaluating the ELA curriculum and how you describe the challenges of navigating the structures of accountability created by Federal policy and mandates. Consent will be given, and any questions from the participant will be answered. The participant will sign the consent form, a dated and signed copy of the form will be given to the participant.

Brief Project Description: This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study aims to understand how curriculum leaders perceive their role and navigate accountability structures.

I. Introduction
    A. Can you start by stating your name, current job title, experience in education, and number of years in your current position?
        1. Probe: Describe your education experience before your current position.
        2. Probe: How would you describe your current role as a Curriculum Leader?
        3. Probe: What made you apply to your current position?
        4. Probe: Were you searching for other positions before obtaining this position?
        5. Did you interview for a curriculum leader position in other school districts before securing your current position?
            a) If so, how would you describe the similarities and differences in job descriptions from one district to another?
        6. Probe: What would you describe as the most rewarding aspect of your role as a curriculum leader?
        7. Probe: What would you describe as the most challenging aspect of your role as a curriculum leader?
II. Unpacking Curriculum Ideas
    A. How would you describe the K-6 ELA curriculum currently being used in your district?
        1. Probe: If resources weren't an issue and you could get any curriculum you wanted, what ELA curriculum would you choose?
            a) Why would you make this choice?
        2. Probe: How does your district's K-6 ELA curriculum align with your expectations?

3. Probe: How do you feel the K-6 ELA curriculum aligns with your district's mission statement?

III. Equity and Access Ideals

    A. Suppose your district tasked you with presenting the current ELA curriculum to parents and community members; how would you answer the following question:

        1. How do you believe the current curriculum meets the needs of the different student populations attending your school?

IV. Navigating Accountability

    A. What role do Federal policies such as ESEA, NCLB, RTTT, and ESSA play in curriculum selection and implementation?

        1. Probe: What would you describe as the most challenging aspects of current federal and state policy mandates when making decisions about the ELA curriculum?

        2. Probe: What is your role in the district's mandated standardized test performance reporting process?

V. Curriculum Leader Autonomy

    A. Describe your district's ELA curriculum selection and adoption process.

    B. How would you describe the level of autonomy you currently feel you have over curriculum-related decisions?

        1. Probe: If you were given full authority to select and implement the ELA curriculum despite policy mandates, how, if at all, would the curriculum selection process differ?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2 - FOCUS GROUP

Placing Curriculum Leaders' Shared Experience in Context

For all respondents: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this second round of interviews for my dissertation research study. As a reminder, this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how curriculum leaders perceive their role and navigate accountability structures. I would like you to think about this interview as an opportunity to consider your current role as a curriculum leader and how you navigate the structure of accountability associated with federal policy mandates. Please feel free to ask for clarification at any point. Consent will be given, and any questions from the participant will be answered. The participant will sign the consent form, a dated and signed copy of the form will be given to the participant.

To start the discussion, I ask that we take turns introducing ourselves by providing the following information:

Brief Project Description:
 I. Introduction
   A. Probe: Please state your name, title, number of years in your current position, and experience in education.
Focus Group Format: After receiving signed consent to participate in this study, I mailed each of you a questionnaire to establish some general background. In addition to the questionnaire, each participant received a participant journal with directions for use and solicited prompts to respond to before meeting for this focus group. Today, I would like you to use your journal responses as a guide for this next activity. I will use an online "Answer Garden" application to display any words or phrases you input in real-time. Any words or phrases inputted more than once will appear larger to indicate a common shared experience. All answers displayed are anonymous. I will display one prompt at a time and ask participants to input their responses. After all rounds of prompts and answers have been inputted, I will ask the group to share their interpretations of the information displayed. This will help establish themes or patterns in your shared experience as curriculum leaders. Please feel free to include any words or phrases that you wrote in your journal. If you think of additional words or phrases you have not journaled, please add them to your journal and input them into Answer Garden, too.
 II. Curriculum Leader Role
   A. Probe: List the most challenging aspects of your job.
   B. Probe: Describe your district's process for curriculum selection and implementation.
III. ELA Curriculum
   A. Probe: In your professional opinion, list positive characteristics of your district's current ELA curriculum.

        B. Probe: List any negative characteristics, in your professional opinion, of your district's current ELA curriculum.

IV.   Federal Policy Mandates

        A. Probe: List your district's challenges of policy mandate compliance.

V.   Reflecting on Meaning Making of Phenomenon: Shared Experience

        A. For all respondents: Review your shared responses to each prompt. Anyone can jump in to answer:

            1. How do you interpret your shared responses?

Grand tour question: Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about your experience in your current position or the district where you are employed?

I will use my research journal to create analytic notes for later memo creation while I record participant responses, body language, behavior, and interactions with each other.

APPENDIX F: MEMBER CHECK QUESTIONNAIRE

Establishing Knowledge and Understanding - Participants and Researchers as Co-creators

Brief Description: After each interview and the focus group have been conducted and transcripts uploaded and transcribed, I will make a copy of both for each participant to review. Birt et al. (2016) stated that allowing participants to review raw data helps the researcher check their story's accuracy. Using a member check as part of a triangulation method in qualitative research is a collaborative technique that can enrich thick data by considering participants' first-hand experience (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023).

Member Check Protocol:
1. Return interview transcripts to respondents
   - Ask them to verify facts and confirm their original words
   - This may result in respondents adding new information
   - They may also delete unwanted data – changing the results
2. Member check interview using transcript
   - Each participant receives their interview transcript
   - Discuss the interview transcript with the respondents
   - Focuses on confirming or modifying transcript
   - Can potentially enable the addition of new data
   - This may also lead to them changing details they dislike

Dear (participant name)

Thank you for participating in an individual interview and focus group as part of my research study for my doctoral dissertation. Sharing your personal experience as a curriculum leader and an educator will add in-depth understanding and inform other educators and policymakers in the field. To ensure the highest level of trustworthiness and validation of your experience, I am asking you to review the transcript of our conversations and verify them for accuracy. After receiving and reviewing the transcripts, I will contact you via phone or email to discuss and address any questions. I appreciate your participation and feedback and look forward to sharing my findings.

Sincerely,
Mary Pettit
Ed.D Candidate, Molly University