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SUBJECT: Resilient Teachers Qualitative Project Executive Summary

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## Introduction

This report offers recommendations and next steps to the Knox County Schools Curriculum and Instruction Department for disseminating new curricula. The recommendations are based on interviews with a cohort of teachers.

### *Statement of the Problem*

District members were concerned that teachers who have been identified as effective and whose practices align with what the district would like to see across all schools may be reluctant to adopt the new ELA and math curricula. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives and experiences of teachers toward the new curricula to determine what strategies can be used to increase adoption rates.

## Theory

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Diffusion of Innovation (DOI), which charts “the process by which [an innovation] is communicated over time among members of a social system.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This innovation could be a new idea, practice, or the present study’s case, the new district-sanctioned ELA and math curricula. There are three basics/tenets of DOI, which include the ten key characteristics of the innovation, the five different stages of its adoption, and the types of individuals who adopt the innovation at which phases. Of these elements, the findings primarily centered around the curricula’s relative advantages and compatibilities with current teaching practices.

Specifically, this study was informed by Rogers’[[2]](#footnote-2) approach to DOI, which emphasizes that it is the potential adopter’s *perceptions* of the innovation’s attributes, not the attributes themselves, that most strongly affects adoption rate. Within his framework, five characteristics of the innovation are most influential: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability.

## Method

***Data Collection***

Because this study aimed to understand teachers’ experiences and perceptions about using the new curricula in their classrooms, interviews were the chosen method. While a quantitative approach is useful to examine human behavior as variables, qualitative research is appropriate when seeking to understand the motivations behind such behavior. Six teachers were selected for the interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and to protect the anonymity of all participants, pseudonyms were used in the transcription files.

***Analysis***

The data were coded in three phases. The first phase consisted of versus coding, which is used to identify the terms by which individuals, social systems, processes, concepts, etc., come into direct conflict[[3]](#footnote-3). *Experienced teacher vs. novice teacher* isan example versus code that was found across all of the interviews. From there, 20 codes were developed, which were then axially coded into 10 during the second phase of analysis. Finally, these categories were organized according to DOI theory into the final four themes of the study.

## Key Findings

While the district chose curricula based on the belief they will address the needs of students, this analysis of the interview data was grounded in teachers’ needs because they tend to have the most say in whether or not curricula get adopted/used in the classroom. Findings in this study highlight the four most prominent needs participants in the study focused on:

1) students need to be practically successful in the short term

2) students need to be ideologically successful in the long term

3) the classroom must be an effective learning environment

4) teachers need to refine and hone their craft

Of the five characteristics of an innovation considered influential in the DOI framework, teachers were most concerned with curriculum compatibility and relative advantages over what they were already doing in the classroom to address these four needs. The following sections detail each need, what teachers currently do to address the need, and what they think of the new curricula’s levels of relative advantage or compatibility with current teaching practice.

***Students need to be practically successful in the short term***

Participants described a history where district-sanctioned curricula focused almost exclusively on the practical success of students. This focus often resulted in what participants referred to as direct instruction, such as spending most of the class at the front, lecturing, having their students copy, memorize, and regurgitate what the teachers wrote on the board, projector, or included in canvas. In addition, students had to answer the same way to pre-determined questions and assignments. In their first years as educators, participants often described following those old curricula quite closely to ensure their students would pass TNReady and EOC exams.

Participants outlined several different examples of where they felt the new curricula did not address students’ needs to be practically successful. Examples include a heavier emphasis on narrative essays, lack of built-in spiraling, and ignorance of classroom limitations (lack of experimental materials). The three most significant issues for participants were the following:

1. A lack of consistency between pacing guides and the new curricula
2. A time conflict between the curricula materials and building-level (e.g., school calendar) or classroom constraints (e.g., student social-emotional needs)
3. Gaps between what the curricula cover and what is on state tests.

These issues suggest that other forces—communication gaps, pacing guide errors, etc.—are constructing the new curricula as incompatible with what they feel students should know to pass tests for which they as instructors are held accountable.

***Students need to be ideologically successful in the long term***

Participants did describe caring about ensuring students reach practical success. However, their interview answers suggested their passion for teaching centered around getting students engaged in their own learning and helping them build life skills such as critical thinking and risk-taking. This focus was coded as ideological success. Examples include teaching challenge-based learning and inviting students to choose their own topics about which to write.

Unlike their perceived disadvantages in preparing students for practical success, the new curricula received relatively favorable views from the participants for their heavier emphasis on ideological success. For the most part, all of the teachers said they believed the new math and ELA curricula did provide opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, discussions, and problem-solving. Participants gave several examples of using a unit, an assignment, or other materials from the curriculum that they felt explained a particular concept or fostered the desired learning outcome from students. That participants described using only bits and pieces of the curricula instead of wholesale adoption suggests they view material supplemental to the ideological curriculum they have already developed. In other words, a curriculum may have advantages over the old one, but overall it is not more advantageous in its entirety than what teachers created.

The participants did seem to agree that following the new curricula could be useful for newer or perhaps less effective teachers than themselves. One exception to this consensus was a participant who expressed closely adhering to the new district-sanctioned curriculum because they felt it freed them from having to develop materials and they could focus solely on in-classroom instruction. They felt the new curriculum was a welcome replacement to the materials they were creating or searching for that did not teach students to discuss, engage, and create. While this idea suggests the curriculum is performing according to district expectations, the results indicate that this participant was the only one of the interviewees who had not developed their ideological course yet. They may not be a “new” teacher in the practical sense; however, the point at which they became aware of the need to teach ideological success, realized old curricula excluded it, and began creating their material to address that gap positions this participant ideologically as among the newer teachers. This finding suggests that while the new curricula are seen as ideologically compatible with effective teaching practice, effective teachers are not seeing the advantage of completely replacing a practice they have seen teach students ideological success.

***The classroom must be an effective learning environment***

Participants spent a large portion of the interviews discussing how they addressed what became coded as the need for the classroom to be an effective learning environment. Participants described how their evolving teaching practice included building time into the semester for regular conversations, consistent check-ins with students, and other tasks that focused on the social-emotional needs of students. Committing to these social-emotional needs of the students increases student trust in the teachers and encourages students to engage in their learning. What is more, regular communication with the students enables participants to tailor their teaching, scaffolding, and in-the-moment assessments of each student. Such assessments include exit tickets, student discussions, walkthroughs, and conversations to hear where and how students are making sense of the lessons and concepts. In short, a teacher’s everyday work deepens their knowledge of diverse educational contexts, which, in turn, determines their pedagogical strategies and actions.

In contrast, participants expressed concern over the curricula’s (as well as the pacing guide) apparent lack of acknowledgment of these nuances in teaching. Participants described the exclusion of details such as building time to set expectations at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, they indicated confusion over how a scripted curriculum with a specified set of assessment types would account for the subtle differences among students’ experiences in the classroom or to reach every child. It comes across as assuming that students are isolated in a vacuum as individuals, not as part of a social collective embedded in all sorts of different, converging, and conflicting contexts.

***Teachers need to refine and hone their practice***

The three themes above led to the development of the final theme: the participants’ need to refine and hone their teaching practice. They described feeling most effective when they could teach and manage the classroom so that their students felt excited to learn and engage, developed critical thinking and other life skills, and ultimately passed the state assessments. Finding and maintaining this balance is acquired through experience and passion and shaped by varying contexts and external influences. In outlining their progression as teachers, the participants reported the benefits of even the old curricula as guides to which they more closely adhered when they were new to the job. This sentiment aligned with their primary concern as educators with ensuring they were preparing their students to pass state tests, for which they are held accountable (via TVAAS and other metrics). As the participants gained experience over the years, they spoke of relying less on direct instruction and more on their growing ability to interpret and transform such subject-matter knowledge in facilitating student learning. An example of this process is slowly switching out old curriculum materials for their own lessons, activities and assignments, and assessments. Approaching this finding from the understanding that the participants do see a curriculum as one crucial part of their knowledge base for teaching provides an entry point for the new curriculum as a means by which teachers can deepen that knowledge base if messaging does not suggest it is to replace it entirely.

## Future Directions

In response to teachers’ perceptions and experiences, REA offers the following suggestions below. This is by no means an exhaustive list; however, it does provide some possible directions moving forward.

* Determine and clearly define the parameters of teachers’ acceptable level of curriculum adoption.
  + Recognizing that contextual variables (teacher inexperience, classroom management, class size, class length, etc.) can impede full adoption, what priorities of adoption can the district be willing lose, and what will it not compromise on? How will the teachers’ concerns with the new curriculum be identified, and what will the district do to help them meet that pre-defined acceptable level of adoption?
  + For example, some teachers struggle with how much personal material they could no longer use. How will you communicate to them that they will gain more as teachers (such as the opportunity to develop their teaching practice further) by adopting the new curriculum than they would lose by adopting it?
* Conduct interviews with teachers across a broader range of effectiveness to determine if their concerns align with or differ from themes developed in this study. Findings will aid in honing communication strategies for future curriculum adoptions.
* Conduct interviews with teachers that explore how they know when they can trust that the materials they create are effective. Findings from this set of interviews can aid in crafting messaging with which teachers can more easily identify.

1. Dingfelder, H. E., & Mandell, D. S. (2011). Bridging the research-to-practice gap in autism intervention: An application of diffusion of innovation theory. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *41*(5), 597-609. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rogers, EM. Diffusion of innovations. 5. New York: Free Press; 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. sage. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)