

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: EXPLORING THE REAL-WORLD COMPLEXITIES OF  
IMPLEMENTATION IN THE CLASSROOM

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using a three-article format, this dissertation investigates language and literacy in the context of K-12 education in the U.S. Beginning with a humanities-based Critical Essay, article one traces translanguaging from its inception to its current state. This article intends to introduce translanguaging from a broad spectrum of interpretations and critiques for the reader to shape their own informed opinion about the nature of translanguaging and its claims. Article two of this dissertation encompasses a creative writing piece that illustrates my original intent of using translanguaging as a pedagogical device for a researcher-practitioner piece and details why I remain cautious about translanguaging as a viable tool. Article three includes a case study that investigates the curriculum implementation process of a researcher-practitioner team when navigating an unexpected mid-year curriculum change, specifically focusing on the supplementation of our ELA curriculum. Data sources for this study include student English Language Arts work and teacher-reported observations. Findings reveal that while digitally-sourced curricula serve as quick, time-efficient solutions for locating supplemental teaching materials, the quality of such materials can be poor. Digitally-sourced curricula often require significant adaption, ultimately creating unanticipated challenges to practice.

**This dissertation is dedicated to the hustle. All praises due.**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                          |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| ARTICLE ONE: THE DIRECTIONS OF TRANSLANGUAGING’S SOCIAL JUSTICE AIMS ....                                                | 1   |
| The Minoritized Language Speaker.....                                                                                    | 3   |
| A Cursory Overview Translanguaging .....                                                                                 | 6   |
| Critiques of Translanguaging.....                                                                                        | 10  |
| A Convinced Supporter of Translanguaging .....                                                                           | 18  |
| A Path Forward .....                                                                                                     | 22  |
| In the End.....                                                                                                          | 26  |
| REFERENCES .....                                                                                                         | 28  |
| ARTICLE TWO: FITTING A CIRCLE INTO A SQUARE .....                                                                        | 38  |
| Vignette 1: Connecting to Translanguaging .....                                                                          | 40  |
| Vignette 2: Connecting to Teaching .....                                                                                 | 47  |
| Vignette 3: Bend but Don’t Break .....                                                                                   | 49  |
| Vignette 4: Monsters Under the Bed .....                                                                                 | 50  |
| REFERENCES .....                                                                                                         | 55  |
| ARTICLE THREE: TRIAL AND ERROR: EXPLORING THE PROMISES AND PITFALLS<br>OF IMPLEMENTING DIGITALLY-SOURCED CURRICULA ..... | 58  |
| Contextual Narrative.....                                                                                                | 58  |
| Research Questions.....                                                                                                  | 63  |
| Literature Review.....                                                                                                   | 64  |
| Complex Dynamic Systems Theory: Theoretical Framework.....                                                               | 74  |
| Methodology .....                                                                                                        | 78  |
| Methods.....                                                                                                             | 86  |
| Contextual Narrative Continued (Findings).....                                                                           | 90  |
| Discussion .....                                                                                                         | 107 |
| Conclusion .....                                                                                                         | 115 |
| REFERENCES .....                                                                                                         | 117 |

# ARTICLE ONE: THE DIRECTIONS OF TRANSLANGUAGING'S SOCIAL JUSTICE

## AIMS

Translanguaging is a concept at the nexus of many language-related domains such as second language acquisition, linguistics, language education, language policy, and educational reform (Brooks, 2022; Leung & Valdés, 2019; May, 2014; Sembiante, 2016). Typically, the term describes the flexible use or mixing of languages by multilingual speakers as an everyday practice of communication (de Jong, 2013; García, 2010; Pablo & Christian, 2023). Garcia and Wei (2014) formally describe translanguaging as

An approach to the use of language, bilingualism and education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages. (p. 2)

As the uptake of translanguaging as a theory and pedagogical tool has become increasingly prevalent over recent decades (Canagarajah, 2011; Lewis et al., 2012b, 2012a; Poza, 2017), scholars and theorists continue to advocate for a bigger spotlight on the concept (Garcia et al., 2008; Garcia, 2009; Gonzalez-Howard & Suarez, 2021; Otheguy et al., 2015, 2019; Prada, 2022; Wei, 2018, 2022).

Concurrent with scholars calling for greater discussion of translanguaging, more minoritized language speakers<sup>1</sup> are filling U.S. classrooms than ever before, and this number continues to grow (Anderson, 2005; Villegas et al., 2018). In the fall of 2010, the percentage of minoritized language speaker students was 9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students (National Center

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<sup>1</sup> Minoritized language speakers in the U.S. are individuals or groups who identify as speakers of languages other than English and who may experience social, cultural, and linguistic marginalization in the U.S. due to the dominance of the English language and culture.

for Education Statistics, 2021a). In the fall of 2018, the population of minoritized language speakers rose to 10.2 percent or 5 million students. With a total population of public-school students of about 50 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b), roughly one in ten students are categorized as a minoritized language speaker.

As evidenced by Cook (2010) and Juvonen and Källkvist (2021), pedagogies that use multiple languages are not new ideas. As such, aligning with scholars' advocacy of translanguaging, plus the uptick in the number of speakers of languages other than English in the U.S., what has ensued is a galvanization of the idea that translanguaging is an effective pedagogical tool that necessarily promotes equity (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014, 2019; Ortega, 2019). Proponents of translanguaging have documented its use in ethnic studies and ELA classrooms (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018) children's literature (Pérez Rosario & Cao, 2015), science curriculums (Espinosa & Herrera, 2016; Poza, 2018; Stevenson, 2013; Suárez, 2020) and a host of other domains across schools.

This article traces translanguaging from its inception to current state. The intent of this article is to introduce translanguaging from a broad spectrum of interpretations and critiques for the reader to shape their own informed opinion about the nature of translanguaging and its claims. The governing thesis for this piece is as follows: While translanguaging presents a compelling theory to impact language practices, and language perceptions, it is limited by its theoretical ambiguity, practical difficulties for enactment in the classroom and failure to meet the immediate needs of minoritized language speakers. This article is not persuasive in nature. Rather, this article documents translanguaging, the debate surrounding it, and does give my critical assessment on the matter, but makes no attempt to persuade. Ultimately, the intent is for the reader to make their own assessment about the direction of translanguaging debates.

Methodologically, this article approaches translanguaging from a humanities-based Critical Essay genre. This article is not empirical and does not involve data collection. Instead, this article grapples with the undergirding frameworks of translanguaging, its surrounding theories and reflects on the broader societal, cultural and educational implications. Thus I approach the topic similarly to W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* which has been studied extensively as a critical essay for its blend of philosophy, sociology and personal narrative to critique the black American experience (Shaw, 2013).

There are five sections to this essay. First, I highlight how the literature characterizes minoritized language speakers in general. Next, I show how translanguaging scholars have described the concept within the literature. Subsequently, I examine the critiques translanguaging has endured as a conceptual approach to language. I then underscore three tensions emerging in the translanguaging literature regarding claims of translanguaging's emancipatory power in the education of minoritized language speakers in schools and their participation in society at large. To close, I lay ground for a practical path forward that offers a solution to the tensions broached in this piece. An in-depth, critical investigation of translanguaging's claims is of importance to the field of education in that it could enable educators and stakeholders to make informed decisions about its use but also understand its potential shortcomings—all as a means for promoting equity and justice for linguistically minoritized students.

### **The Minoritized Language Speaker**

Before analyzing translanguaging, it is essential to identify the population it has been adapted to support within the U.S., despite its origins in the UK. This section aims to introduce the 'minoritized language speaker' while providing societal context and context set at a U.S. education level. In searching through the extant literature, scholars use the term minoritized

language speakers differently. The term is rarely explicitly defined by authors but rather used in context. My understanding of the term follows Flores and Rosa's (2015), who argued that the linchpin to the definition is the word 'minoritized' as opposed to 'minority.' They argued that the word minoritized emphasizes the *processes* of linguistic validation and invalidation in the U.S. They also highlighted the understanding that this process is neither linear nor straightforward. As such, I define the phrase as follows: Minoritized language speakers in the U.S. are individuals or groups who identify as native speakers of languages other than English and who may experience social, cultural, and linguistic marginalization in the U.S. due to the dominance of the English language and culture.

### **Who is the Minoritized Language Speaker?**

It is essential to situate understandings of minoritized language speakers, then, inside a historical context within the U.S. to make clear the monolingual language ideology that has been endemic throughout the country from its inception. This is especially important as these types of ideologies are exactly what translanguaging has been designed to combat (Garcia, 2009). Fuller (2018) defined language ideologies as ideas about language use and structure that index the political and economic interests of individuals and the social groups to which they belong. An example of a language ideology could be a belief that English is better than Spanish and that more sophisticated people speak English. Fuller (2018) argued that because these ideologies have political implications, they are reflected in explicit policies and laws in a nation. Language ideologies are continually constructed and re-constructed at different micro and macro levels of societies and often lead to the language-dominant majority being considered as the 'ideal,' which leads to the 'othering' of non-dominant language groups (Blackledge, 2000). As an example of how language ideologies can be constructed and re-constructed, Blackledge (2000) highlights

that passing over an Asian American for a job promotion on the grounds of simply being Asian American is illegal. However, passing over that person due to an ‘accent’ is not illegal if the employer deems the accent would interfere with the job, and we must question the discursive notions reinforced through such decisions.

During the colonial era Anglo-Saxon establishment of what is now the U.S., many believed the only way to unite and empower the new nation was by using one language—English (Urban & Wagoner, 2010). It was argued here by Hidehiro and Reece-Miller (2010) that around this time was the inception of the notion that English is to be spoken by everyone in the U.S. because it is the language of the ‘civilized.’ Schiffman (1996) underscores that some of the first documented instances of Anglo-Americans asserting power over people who spoke languages other than English began with German immigration circa the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Schiffman (1996) further detailed that at this juncture, English was starting to be associated with the U.S., and also linked to whiteness, whereas the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be marked by a *solidification* of whiteness in the U.S. Additionally, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also marked the Americanization movement, which intended to link English proficiency to citizenship and instill ‘American values’ into immigrants (Lauret, 2016).

Recent conversations about the rights and welfare of minoritized language speakers abound. de Jong (2013) argues that the dominant narrative for minoritized language speakers' education-related interests revolves around access to proper accommodations within the education system, which assumes U.S. education as a vehicle to address the disparities for minoritized language speakers.

Inquiries of access can be seen within the literature in multiple different instances. Widespread within contemporary literature are questions about how to label this population of

students (García & Garcia, 2009; Gonzalez-Howard & Suarez, 2021; Martínez, 2018). Scholars have argued that we should no longer refer to these students as “English Language Learners” and refer to them as “Emergent Bilinguals” under the claim that this term recognizes students can develop academically in both languages, not just English, which in theory should give students more access to better policy and instruction (Garcia et al., 2008).

An important distinction here is that the term *minoritized language speakers* is usually applied to this population within U.S. societal conversations. While they are still considered minoritized language speakers inside schools, different terms are typically used across administrative cultures in different districts and schools (e.g., English language learner, emergent bilingual). Beyond labeling, current questions revolve around the best ways to provide instructional access and academic supports/services (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016; Burr et al., 2015; De Oliveira, 2019; Duranti & Ochs, 2015; J. Wiley, 2020). Scholars have even asked how teacher beliefs about language affect teaching and access to equitable student learning (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Henderson, 2017; Martínez, 2013; Martínez et al., 2015). Translanguaging has gained currency as a viable mechanism to disrupt the conventional language hierarchies outlined in this section. The next section will introduce the ideology from its inception and provide a working definition.

### **A cursory overview translanguaging**

As an ethos, translanguaging affords a new lens through which to view the language practices of multilingual people as valuable and powerful rather than in need of remediation (Poza, 2017). The term is used to describe the intricate and dynamic language practices of multilingual individuals *as well as* the pedagogical strategies that utilize those practices (García & Lin, 2017). Through the lens of translanguaging theory, the agency of multilingual individuals

is acknowledged as they utilize all their linguistic resources, seamlessly blending and mixing words from the various languages they speak (Tai, 2023). In the classroom, translanguaging might look like a teacher explaining a task to students in Mandarin (their home language). However, the teacher might tactfully embed an English word when introducing important vocabulary.

As Putjada et al. (2022) argue, multilingualism is a fact of life, and this bears consequences on education as students and teachers alike bring their own language practices into the educational environment. Despite the observable reality that multilingualism is ubiquitous, what was pervasive through multiple language-related fields was a bias toward a monolingual view of language (Kachru, 1994).

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars began problematizing monolingualist perspectives and expressed dissatisfaction with views that positioned non-native speakers of English as failed native speakers who were merely aspirants to communicate in the same manner as native speakers (Leung & Valdés, 2019). In turn, applied linguistics scholars began rejecting notions that framed monolingualism as the norm (Canagarajah, 1999; V. Cook, 1999; Davies, 1991; Grosjean, 1989; Kachru, 1994; Pennycook, 1994).

### **The Multilingual Turn**

This problematization of the monolingual perspective of language started what has been termed the “multilingual turn” in language learning (Garcia & Kano, 2014; May, 2014; Ortega, 2013, 2014). This modern, affirmative view of language and multilingualism critiques previous simplified views of language and replaces them with more complex understandings that recognize a more fluid assessment of language that captures the communicative complexity and practices of multilingual people who are most often marginalized immigrants (Flores, 2013).

Scholars have advanced that this marginalization specifically affects the language development and trajectory of academic careers<sup>2</sup> for immigrant families (Brizić, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Gogolin, 2005).

The field of language education had a similar metamorphosis during same time as the multilingual turn, as discussions emerged surrounding the language education of students in bilingual/multilingual learning programs (Cummins, 2021; Ponzio, 2020). Like the multilingual turn, a new pedagogical frame was necessary to understand the fluid language practices of multilingual students in schools, while also challenging subtractive language approaches that continued to view non-native speakers through a Westernized, monolingual lens (Ponzio, 2020).

The concept of translanguaging originates in an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Cen Williams (1994). Williams used the Welsh word “trawsieithu” [translate] to describe a pedagogical practice he observed that consisted of the alteration of language in an English/Welsh classroom where teachers and students *deliberately* blended the input and output of both languages (Tai, 2023). The official coinage of the English term ‘translanguaging’ by Colin Baker (2001) was based on Williams’ observations in that Welsh language revitalization classroom (Wei, 2023).

### **Development of Translanguaging as a Theoretical Approach to Language**

The adoption of translanguaging as an approach to language learning in scholarly literature has increased substantially since its initial theorization. Juvonen and Källkvist (2021) pointed specifically to Garcia as the pioneer in establishing translanguaging as a concept. However, Garcia and Lin (2017) credited two more authors and claimed significant endorsement

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<sup>2</sup> Marginalization’s effects on the language development and career trajectory will be extensively broached in the “Critique 2 - Is it *Actually* Transformative?” section later in this piece.

came from two contributions from Blackledge and Creese (2010a, 2010b). It was during this era that these authors offered a new, malleable view of language, which they felt better reflected multilingual speakers' real-life practices, as their observations showed that multilingual speakers had a proclivity to naturally blend languages when communicating (Wei, 2023; Wei & García, 2022).

After translanguaging gained popularity, Poza (2017) itemized the orientations to translanguaging and categorized the many different definitions. Poza (2017) found three distinct categories of definitions of how translanguaging is defined in the literature. Category one consisted of definitions that referred to blending languages with no sociocultural implications. Category two consisted of definitions that continue to argue for the blending of languages *but also* state that translanguaging can break previous normative language ideologies, particularly in the schooling environment. This posited translanguaging as a vehicle to achieve equity within the schooling system. Lastly, the third category encompassed all the previous criteria but also extended beyond the scope of schooling and intended to upend *societal* language norms within the U.S. This category challenged the established power relations attached to language.

Definitions of translanguaging are typically offered in terms of a *linguistic repertoire* (MacSwan, 2022). People who speak multiple languages have one unitary language repertoire, which is used for all communication purposes (Canagarajah, 2011; Otheguy et al., 2015). This language repertoire is not split into discrete languages (e.g., a separate Spanish and separate English repertoire) but a unitary system where competence in all languages functions symbiotically. Scholars have drawn on this unitary system concept when defining translanguaging. Otheguy et al. (2015) defined translanguaging as “The deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and

politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages.” Garcia and Vogel (2017) defined translanguaging in a similar manner as well.

Translanguaging is a theoretical lens that offers a different view of bilingualism and multilingualism. The theory posits that rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts. (p. 2)

Garcia and Wei (2014) have provided the most comprehensive definition of translanguaging to date. Poza (2017) would situate Garcia and Wei’s (2014) definition as a category three definition that refers to blending languages and also states that translanguaging can break previous normative language ideologies the schooling and society. As such, Garcia and Wei’s (2014) definition will be used as the working definition for this essay. They define translanguaging as

An approach to the use of language, bilingualism and education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages. (p. 2)

### **Critiques of Translanguaging**

As De Meulder et al. (2019) articulate, there has been a recent “explosion” of critical views of translanguaging theory. The recency of these new critical pieces could account for the relative scarcity of available literature with critical views, as currently, only a handful of scholars have contributed so far. Below are three prominent critiques of translanguaging from the literature.

## Critique 1 – What Exactly is Translanguaging?

The first significant critique of translanguaging deals with the precision of the definition (Ballinger et al., 2017; Cummins, 2021, 2021; De Meulder et al., 2019; Jaspers, 2018; Slembrouck & Rosiers, 2018). Concerns over the consistency of the formal definition are well-tracked. Poza's (2017) literature review was explicitly dedicated to the pursuit of itemizing the multiple definitions of translanguaging. Poza's review documented 53 publications from 1996 to 2014 for their descriptions and attributed implications of translanguaging. Similarly, Canagarajah's (2011) literature review described the definition as a set of assumptions and highlighted 12 phrases that all refer to the same practice in some way. Likewise, Cummins (2019) described ten individual terms that refer to the same practice. Additionally, Mazak (2016) identified five different definitions currently being used by translanguaging scholars. Flores (2014) pointed out that the adoption of the term is now used separate from its critical, transformative intentions, which brings questions about how translanguaging has been deployed.

Jaspers (2018) introduced the idea that TL has suffered from what he termed “discursive drift,” which highlights how the uptake and extension of neologisms have inflated and conflated their definition, thus rendering the new term meaningless. Jaspers points to Brubaker and Cooper (2000) who argue that terms of this nature are *hopelessly ambiguous*; Meaning, the word is shrouded in so many different definitions, phrases and applications, it might be past the point of clarity. Similar to Jaspers' use of *discursive drift*, Cummins (2021) argued that as translanguaging has evolved over the past decade, it has acquired a considerable amount of *conceptual baggage* that risks undermining its credibility.

De Meulder et al. (2019) pointed out that translanguaging can refer to a speaker's natural language instinct, bilinguals' impromptu language use, standard cognitive functions, bilingual

pedagogy, and a theory of language and education. And they argued that this is indeed a large undertaking for any single definition.

An examination of the definition(s) demonstrates that while its initial underpinnings are clear, the application of the term is varied and results in approximations. Critics rarely suggest alternatives in their writing. However, Ballinger et al. (2017) suggested the term should be replaced by a distinct umbrella term to be used for all pedagogical practices that support learners drawing from their entire linguistic repertoire. They offered the term “crosslinguistic pedagogy” for these purposes. In all, adopters should have a formal framework to guide their practice in their local context, and as this section explicates, this has yet to be accomplished.

### **Critique 2 – Is it *Actually* Transformative?**

While what is considered transformational in educational research is open to interpretation, it is clear that since translanguaging’s inception and throughout its evolution, the word transformation/transformational has been woven throughout its discourse. Garcia and Wei (2014) noted how translanguaging has the power to transform linguistic practices, which bear implications for changing society, and they also claimed the power to alter socio-political structures. Similarly, Hornberger (2014) referenced the ability of translanguaging’s emancipatory power to change language practices and pedagogies of our education systems. Relatedly, Vogel and Garcia (2017) claimed it has the power to equalize the opportunities for minoritized language speakers within society. Moore et al. (2020) positioned translanguaging as a mechanism to transform academic and political institutions, language education, and language hierarchies and Flores (2022) also hinted at societal linguistic transformation multiple times. With lofty goals such as societal and political transformation, it makes sense to ask, “Can translanguaging actually make the societal transformations it claims?” Scholars have critiqued

this transformational quality that proponents have touted as a drawing feature. As the transformative claims are typically made at the societal level, that is where the detractors pinpoint their critiques.

### ***Societal Implications***

Slembrouck and Rosiers (2018) introduced the idea of gatekeeping contexts within societies where language users must seek the benefits of the languages they have learned. These gatekeeping contexts rely on tools such as tests and exams that lead to professional, social, or economic uplift, like qualifications, job interviews, etc. They argued that we can theorize on breaking down harmful language ideologies and formally introduce hybridity to language, but language users *still* need to deal with real-life consequences of language that are very tangible and immediate. The argument from Slembrouck and Rosiers (2018) is that even with the blurring of language in schools, minoritized speakers still need to participate in processes that require them to perform English and translanguaging would actually be harmful to them under these circumstances.

To add, De Meulder et al. (2019) argued that translanguaging is, by definition, not emancipatory because it ignores the impact of structural constraints on minoritized language speakers. Structural constraints include access to education, access to capital, family background, political oppression, and language ideologies in a real-life context. In other words, the translanguaging agenda of transformation works as a theory, but it becomes less potent when applied to real-life contexts. The major presumption that translanguaging scholars hold, as May (2018) argued, is that all choices are equal among minoritized language speakers. However, in reality, this is not the case, as structural constraints act to limit their options.

The data surrounding access to English as a socioeconomic barrier and discriminatory practices support the views from Slembrouck and Rosiers (2018), De Meulder et al. (2019), and May (2018). These issues are sometimes complex to broach and should not be construed as placing blame on minoritized language speakers. By nature, the structural constraints were designed to put minoritized language speakers in these situations. However, it cannot be ignored that U.S. adults who struggle to speak English earn 33% less in wages than those who speak English well (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). Research shows that those who struggle to speak English have difficulty attaining employment *and* attaining full-time employment (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). When those individuals do attain a job, their salary is significantly lower than that of those who speak English well (Barrow & Markman-Pithers, 2016). Additionally, reports have shown that employers are reluctant to hire people who struggle to speak English, even when they are otherwise qualified (Day & Shin, 2005). This issue has often been categorized as the “earnings penalty,” which is placed on minoritized language speakers due to a mix of capitalistic factors (McManus et al., 1983), assumptive factors that unfairly interpret low English skills as being uneducated (Grenier, 1984), and more unfair assumptions that low English proficiency reflects socioeconomic characteristics that are undesirable for an employee (Davila et al., 1993).

In a continuation of critiquing translanguaging’s transformative claims, Kubota (2016) asked if the blurring of languages in classrooms addresses the very real and immediate issues that minoritized language speakers must contend with outside the classroom. She argued that while a person having the ability to speak English in the U.S. alone is unlikely to provide economic redressing, a model that only promotes the hybridity of language does not tangibly serve anything other than student expression and ignores broader sociopolitical constraints.

Jaspers (2018) underscored that scholars' claims about the adoption of a translanguaging perspective as transformative is a desire more than something observable in practice. The claims are often linked to social justice and are typically understood as a matter of recognition, e.g., "translanguaging gives back the voice that had been taken away by ideologies of monoglot standards" (Garcia & Wei, 2014, p. 105). They are *not* typically understood as a matter of any sort of economic redistribution, which is an actual measure of transformation and would help combat real issues of minoritized language speakers. Jaspers' argument is essentially that economic redistribution could more formally be assessed than "giving back voice," however the translanguaging proponents have not yet offered tangible measures of transformation despite the claims.

### **Critique 3 – What Are the Impacts on Indigenous Peoples?**

This section aims to show how the literature describes that deconstructivism is inherently at odds with the protection of indigenous people. As Kubota (2016) detailed, claiming identity based on language and using the authentication of linguistic resources is often a key strategy for revitalizing and maintaining indigenous people's languages. Kubota (2016) further articulated that while focusing on hybrid language practices to break down monolingual language norms is potentially liberating, this inherently runs the risk of obscuring actual struggles and inequalities by ignoring real-world language problems that indigenous people could be experiencing.

Further, as Bonnin and Unamuno (2021) clarified, clear-cut distinctions between the dominant language and indigenous languages are crucial for indigenous speakers to combat socio-political struggles against the encroachment of cultural, political, and social hegemony of the dominant language. Through vignettes of indigenous Argentine people, Bonnin and Unamuno (2021) illustrated how language-based identity is *particularly* important and show that

it establishes clear-cut boundaries between in-group and out-group dynamics. Language separation also reinforces activism for indigenous speakers' legitimacy in their communities, which are at risk of disappearance. These understandings are inherently at odds with the newer deconstructivist (MacSwan, 2017) understandings of translanguaging that call for the rejection of identity based on language – as will be explained below, they are mutually exclusive.

### **Named Languages**

Reagan (2004) argued that no such thing as named languages exists.

... I want to offer a fairly simple and straightforward proposition: there is, or at least there may well be, no such thing as English. Indeed, my claim is even a bit stronger than this—not only is there arguably no such thing as English, but there is also arguably no such thing as Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, or any other language. (p. 42)

Claims that there is no such thing as named languages have been a particularly confusing and controversial concept within the literature (MacSwan, 2022) and scholars such as Makoni and Pennycook (2005) have gone as far as arguing that we should do away with the idea of named languages. Concerning named languages, Makoni and Pennycook (2005) contended that languages were 'invented' as part of a colonial project in previous centuries. Makoni and Pennycook (2005) reference the idea of invention from Ranger (1983), describing the phenomena of British colonial authorities going to Africa and imposing (inventing) their own constructs to make sense of African traditions and norms.

As such, the idea of invention is closely linked to a “defining aspect,” which viewed Africans as a blank slate with no defined culture. The British imposed their understandings and due to colonization, resulted in culture, names, and languages being lost or haphazardly re-named. And this was Makoni and Pennycook's (2005) reasoning for arguing that languages are

inventions, all-the-while pushing a ‘disinvention’ agenda, which is marketed as a critical and transformative practice that seeks to challenge the status quo in language policy and planning (Pennycook, 2005). And because the notion of named languages are rooted in Western suppositions, they can now be cast as highly suspect. Using a deconstructivist lens, Makoni and Pennycook argued that we (the general public) should do away with concepts of language rights, multilingualism, code-switching, language maintenance, etc. (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005).

Early contributions from Garcia explicitly endorsed ideas of multilingualism, bilingualism, language rights, language based on identity, etc. (Garcia, 2009). These ideas explicitly support indigenous language rights MacSwan (2022). MacSwan (2022) pointed to recent controversy about whether named languages exist. The term named languages refers to the languages that we are all familiar with (Russian, Chinese, Tagalog, etc.). Named languages are social, not linguistic, objects. Whereas the idiolect of a particular individual is a linguistic object defined in terms of lexical and structural features, the named language of a nation or social group is not; its boundaries and membership cannot be established on the basis of lexical and structural features (Otheguy, 2015). As MacSwan (2017) noted, “The supposition that they do not, called *deconstructivism*, implies that multilingualism and a vast array of related topics on linguistic diversity are fictions” (Introduction, para. 1).

De Meulder et al. (2019) asserted that the translanguaging theory has been remarkably unhelpful in thinking about the dynamics of sign language, which they posited is a minority language in the same way that an indigenous language is. They bring to bear the concern of Deaf people about the popularization of non-deaf people learning sign language, which they are using to support their spoken speech. This leads to them knowing ‘signs’ but not sign language. Under the guise of translanguaging, the new (non-deaf) signers are blurring language in ways that are

inaccessible to Deaf people. Promoting translanguaging in this sense further leads to the inaccessibility of language for the intended population. As Cenoz and Gorter (2017) highlighted, it is necessary to adopt a sustainable use of translanguaging rooted in localized reality.

The critiques in this section illustrate some of the criticisms around how translanguaging scholars have failed to account for the language dynamics of indigenous people and argue their language should be considered in ways that *create a need* for their language, *distinguish it* from other languages, and *protect it* from the encroachment of the dominant language – which, in most cases, is the language of the colonizers. To this point in the article, I have not inserted a personal judgement on the matter. As such, now, I will share my personal critical assessment on translanguaging to make my stance on the matter clear.

### **A Convinced Supporter of Translanguaging**

Throughout this piece, I have critically assessed translanguaging definitions and arguments. Despite its multiple orientations, translanguaging scholars have persuaded me to believe in the importance of the concept as a tool for rethinking about language in education and more broadly in society. Although much of the deconstructivist stance relies on critical theories lacking empirical verification in the traditional sense, I still deem the arguments delineated in this essay to hold merit; Mainly because translanguaging's critical stance allows for the advocacy of oppressed language speakers. It also gives us the vocabulary to pinpoint language-related issues and facilitate meaningful discussions.

Anecdotally, I think I see the worth in translanguaging primarily because I come from an immigrant Cape Verdean family. As Flores (2022) articulated, every so often a word is coined that puts a name to an experience that we previously never knew how to describe. This portrays my feeling of translanguaging and further convinces me of its value. I grew up next door to a

Cape Verdean Social club that attracted people from all over the region that spoke multiple languages. From a young age, I have watched and participated in the blurring of language that the definition of translanguaging captures. For me, understandings of translanguaging that attempt to document the real language practices of multilingual people are evident and tangible. I have been a language teacher for about a decade. I taught in an international school in Beijing, China, where I witnessed students from various linguistic backgrounds collectively blur language to communicate in ways that were precisely detailed through translanguaging scholars in this essay.

I taught in a Sheltered English Immersion<sup>3</sup> classroom in Boston. There, I observed how my ‘native’ Spanish-speaking students were sometimes deemed incapable of performing high-quality work due to their language dynamics. Sometimes my classroom would not qualify for resources because others assumed they would not benefit from them due to language. I genuinely appreciate that I have the translanguaging framework for a culturally sustaining pedagogy that invites students to use their home language in my classroom (Paris, 2012), and it is deeply important that I make this clear. However, having meticulously examined translanguaging, I recognize tensions in how the literature mobilizes it. The tensions I notice have allowed me to pinpoint two specific issues that dovetail with the three critiques from the literature in the previous section.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Sheltered English immersion' means an English language acquisition process for young children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language. Books and instruction materials are in English and all reading, writing, and subject matter are taught in English. Although teachers may use a minimal amount of the child's native language when necessary (General Law - Part I, Title XII, Chapter 71A, Section 2, n.d.).

Below, I briefly delineate the two issues that have emerged from my analysis. The issues below consider the practicality of translanguaging's significant claims regarding language as an instrument of power in K–12 and society.

### **Issue One – The Miscommunication Issue**

I resonate with critique number one in the last section—that translanguaging has a communication issue. This means how information about it is disseminated to the public can be too confusing, making it impractical. This confusion causes the implementation of the concept to happen in different ways, and I fear this may hinder its use as a pedagogical tool and as an apparatus for societal change. Of principal concern is the pedagogical use of translanguaging. While not abundant, empirical research has shown that using translanguaging in classrooms, in one case *can* inadvertently reinforce the hegemony of English (Martínez-Roldán, 2015). Because structures like testing are still a factor in U.S. education, this caused a group of teachers to inadvertently value the English language over the minoritized language, which at the very least, highlights that unintended outcomes of this manner might advise that a keen eye be used to examine how translanguaging information is dispersed to teachers.

Because translanguaging has a communication problem, I worry it also spurs an adoption problem. To make societal change, adoption is needed from the public at large, and considering the documented ambiguity of translanguaging, it is not evident that the general public has an incentive to unpack translanguaging's contents, but translanguaging scholars assume this incentive in their rhetoric. Especially since there is a clear monolingual orientation toward language in the U.S., as 78% of the country identifies themselves as English-only speakers, and this number is steadily increasing (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). My view is that if translanguaging were more concise in definition and scope, it could garner more interest. While

scholars are passionate about deconstructing harmful endemic language ideologies in the U.S., the reality is, amidst life's various responsibilities, the rest of the country may not see this as a pertinent issue. In this practical sense, to most of the country, there may be no urgent need to tend to matters of language.

## **Issue Two – The Immediate Needs Issue**

I echo the sentiments of critique number two in the previous section. I think the scholars have wholly disregarded any theorization on the immediate practical needs of certain groups of minoritized language speakers, which can dull translanguaging's transformative claims. While it stands to reason that blurring language and recognizing the linguistic practices of multilingual people in society and schools can have the long-term potential to break down harmful language ideologies, it is hard-pressed to change the short-term structural constraints that minoritized language speakers deal with daily. Again, I feel that the chances of translanguaging having the ability to truly change socio-political structures (Garcia & Wei, 2014), education systems (Hornberger, 2014), or political institutions (Moore et al., 2020) will be difficult *because* translanguaging faces challenges of institutional structures that are unable to accommodate translanguaging at present. And because changing those structures is a long-term political process, sharp attention must be paid to the short-term. In scholars' public communication of translanguaging, I feel they have yet to address this in substantive ways.

When I think about translanguaging's lack of attention to day-to-day issues such as a person's need to pass an English test for a job, I am reminded of an anecdote from my life where I was tasked with accompanying my cousin to the corner store. Sonia (pseudonym) had just arrived from Cape Verde and did not speak English. I vividly remember thinking, *I'm in third grade. Why do I need to bring her to the store? And why can't she speak Kriolu there?* I was

very confused by this task, which to me, was a response to the realization of the very reality that life for minoritized language speakers in the U.S. is difficult when they do not speak English. In this sense, my critique of translanguaging does not lie so much within translanguaging as a concept itself but in its oversight of addressing the immediate practical needs of minoritized language speakers.

### **A Path Forward**

As a path forward, I was previously persuaded by MacSwan's (2017) *multilingual perspective on translanguaging* as a practical option to support minoritized language speakers.

This perspective accepts individual multilingualism as not only psychologically real, in the integrated sense, but also universal. Here, codeswitching may be seen as an instance of translanguaging, alongside other bilingual phenomena such as translation, borrowing, and additional processes, in a range of modalities, as in earlier treatments (Garcia, 2009, p. 45; Garcia, 2011, p. 147). (MacSwan, 2017, p. 191)

MacSwan above points toward a reversal of translanguaging *back* to its earlier understandings that supported discrete named languages, language rights, identity based on language and location, etc. The advantage of a multilingual perspective is that it stresses longstanding language notions that have been accepted in the conventional canon for decades (such as ideas like multilingualism and difference that have become de-emphasized). But also, by way of valuing translanguaging's earlier interpretations, it continues to challenge the harmful language ideologies that have been endemic throughout the U.S. and continues to push fluidity of language that values actual language practices of people who speak multiple languages.

Under the multilingual perspective, there is a solution to each of the three critiques presented in this piece from the literature. As detractors have questioned the precision of

translanguaging, the multilingual perspective provides a more straightforward view that I think could allow for a new, simpler formal definition; This could cause more people to adopt translanguaging and apply it more practically. In response to critique number two, that translanguaging cannot enact societal change and ignores the structural constraints that minoritized language speakers deal with, the multilingual perspective would be an effective model for scholars to more practically theorize solutions to combat issues they face. I believe the multilingual perspective most clearly responds to critique three, which is that translanguaging notions are inherently harmful to indigenous peoples.

I fear the arguments that suggest there are no such things as named languages might be perceived as inflammatory and off-putting to the public. With the recognition of named languages, language separation, and language as identity, indigenous groups could keep their language distinct from dominant colonizing languages that have acted as hegemonic forces for far too long.

In MacSwan's most recent (2024) manuscript, he further indexed translanguaging's relationship to deconstructivism, characterizing translanguaging as a tacit theory represented by a vagueness that defies empirical assessment. MacSwan positions the tacit nature of the ideology as a flaw within the construct that indicates a significant limitation. This limitation prevents translanguaging from being evaluated by established conventions of academic rigor, making it vulnerable to intense scrutiny. Central to MacSwan's argument is *because* translanguaging neglects empirical rigor, it gives space to harmful language ideologies by normalizing beliefs about language that are unverifiable.

In this manuscript, MacSwan noted 32 different publications that express concerns about translanguaging. He highlighted that many of those publications call for the multilingual

perspective on translanguaging, suggesting that the literature supports and aligns with his vision for a better future. These 32 publications, spanning from 2017 to 2023, highlight the emergence of the multilingual perspective as a recent and popular concept in the discourse surrounding translanguaging.

May (2022) further noted the ossification of translanguaging as a newfound orthodoxy, against which he cautioned educators and scholars. He argued that the rush to establish translanguaging as a dominant academic paradigm has led to a misrepresentation of academic findings (particularly in linguistics) that have come before it. To this end, translanguaging acts as a dominating force rather than a liberating one. MacSwan (2024) noted that deconstructivist notions and translanguaging may now be immutably associated, and because of this new entrenched relationship, MacSwan no longer argues for the multilingual perspective on translanguaging. Instead, he urges colleagues to contribute to the literature on theoretical and pedagogical plurilanguaging. MacSwan cites plurilanguaging's ability to encompass the early notions of translanguaging before the adoption of deconstructivism, which offers greater clarity than the current form of translanguaging. This perspective is what motivated MacSwan's push to contribute to the literature related to plurilanguaging<sup>4</sup>.

Kubota (2016) critically diagnosed the current state of the translanguaging debate as harmful. In her manuscript, she coined the 'multi/pluri turn,' which attempts to align applied linguistics and language education factions in their focus on language hybridity. As she stated, "A recent prominent trend in applied linguistics is a multilingual or dynamic turn (Flores 2013; May 2014), which focuses on the plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity of language and language

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<sup>4</sup> While it is outside the scope of this manuscript, it should be noted that there is also debate about the terms *multilingualism* vs. *plurilingualism* in that some argue the prefix multi- suggests separation and the prefix pluri- suggests diversity (García & Otheguy, 2020).

use to challenge a traditional paradigm of understanding linguistic practices in various contexts” (p. 475).

Kubota recognized that the multi/pluri turn has grown in popularity. A new canon has been created, characterized by an academic culture of incessant knowledge production for competitive gain and symbolic capital. This might be best exemplified by Garcia et al. (2021) who stated, “We have purposely come up with new terms. We speak and write about racialized bilinguals, raciolinguistic ideologies, translanguaging, and a critical translingual approach.” (p. 221). Perceivably, they are creating new terms to argue their side of the debate, and I fear MacSwan’s newfound focus on plurilanguaging is similar. It just puts a band-aid on a pervasive issue where two sides are debating and are not necessarily diametrically opposed. That is, both scholarly lines of inquiry are aligned enough that they have a similar starting point in which they believe multilinguals have a linguistic repertoire that can be and should be mobilized according to their needs within an educational environment that otherwise discourage their multilingual practices for the purpose of curricular accessibility and identity affirmation (Garcia, 2012; MacSwan, 2017). They are aligned enough that they have a similar ending point in which they both believe in a future that challenges and disrupts prevailing language ideologies that oppress minoritized language speakers (Garcia et al., 2021; MacSwan, 2022; May, 2022). However, the debate suggests that they diverge in their method of arriving at a desirable ending point, which creates this incessant knowledge production that Kubota (2016) pinpointed.

At a time when it seemed the multilingual perspective was gaining steam, MacSwan has pivoted to a new focus on plurilanguaging, and I fear that this marks the start of jargon inflation/jargon creep (Tanigawa-Lau, 2014) that further isolates non-subject matter experts whom translanguaging/linguistics presumably helps. As evidenced through well-meaning, good-

faith arguments, both sides create new foci to combat the other side. Ironically, on this very topic MacSwan (2022) puts May (2022) in conversation in the afterword in MacSwan's own book.

Inevitably, it seems, any 'new' theoretical paradigm involves the repudiation of established ones – emphasizing how different, revolutionary, this new paradigm is. In the process, we often find a high degree of historical amnesia, or at least historical ellipsis, as I have already highlighted. This synchronic rather than diachronic view of the field. (p. 334)

I worry that MacSwan's suggestion of moving towards plurilanguaging just puts a Band-Aid on the real problem. Which appears to be that both sides of the debate continue with their knowledge production in ways that alienate future teachers, the general public and possibly causes scholars in language education and linguistics to reconceptualize whole paradigms just for the sake of it. As opposed to solving immediate instructional problems rooted in terminological distinctions that are not that different on the level of practice.

### **In the End**

Prior to MacSwan's 2024 piece, I was firmly aligned with his call for a reversal back to early-stage translanguaging. I thought the reversal appeared to be a reasonable compromise that recognized the contributions of applied linguistics but also validated translanguaging's capabilities to foster fluidity of language – a middle ground approach. *Since* the publishing of his 2024 piece, I proceed with caution, and from this angle, I am not in complete alignment with his views as I am not convinced that shifting focus to plurilanguaging represents the best path forward. The problem, it seems, remains of a metalinguistic order that to a certain extent does not benefit teacher education.

I feel that translanguaging has created an adversarial relationship with other multilingual theories that could have been avoided. This situation leads me to believe translanguaging just wants to supplant one rigid reality (current monolingual focus) and *force* another rigid reality (future multilingual focus). And this raises cause for concern as it illustrates the relationship between language and power that has long been debated in academic circles (Fairclough, 1995). As such, I feel stuck in a proverbial no-mans-land, where I cannot fully support either side at this juncture. However, this debate has taught me about the diverse range of assumptions and definitions of language that are available in within the literature. And ultimately, understanding of the range of perspectives affords me the ability to situate myself within the conversation conceptualize language in ways that fit *my* worldview.

I believe that we need to simplify how translanguaging is communicated to teachers and the public while theorizing more practical solutions for day-to-day issues. While I question the present clarity and purposed power of translanguaging, I think overall it *does* act as an effective apparatus for a measurable amount of change. I reach the conclusion of this essay with the following question. If language is an instrument of power, and if language is a concept, translanguaging risks becoming a homogenizing discourse that cannot avoid exercising power; and accordingly, it can work to censor different ways of thinking, teaching, and researching language. The hegemonizing force of this term is what led me to the topic of this essay. When considering translanguaging, we need to bear in mind that even what we think is helpful to the populations we seek to help, *can* inadvertently work against them.

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## ARTICLE TWO: FITTING A CIRCLE INTO A SQUARE

This article acts as an ode to my love for creative writing and journaling. Unfortunately, my writing in these genres has withered away to nothing since starting this Ph.D. program. As such, this chapter is a blend of journaling, memoir, and perhaps more conventional academic-style writing that attempts to link the preceding and succeeding chapters. In the same way the troubled teen rebels against society for crushing his individuality, this chapter is also a protest of sorts. Academia has afforded me a lot. I am grateful for being here. But as most people do, I have a gripe with it. I have always felt that I cannot express myself in the manner I wish. It could be argued that the traditional conventions of academic writing allow for an accurate measure of quality because everyone is writing based on the same rules. However, I have felt that the need to adhere to these conventions has stifled scholarly expression as a creative affair. I am using this article to finally say what I want to say and tell the stories I want to tell and learn from this process.

But why did I decide to pursue a Ph.D. in the first place? Until my fifth year in this program, I was unsure I truly knew *why* I decided to pursue this path. Throughout the years, the inevitable question always arose from others, “What made you decide to do a PhD program?” I always offered an answer that sounded right to the ears but at odds with my heart. It was not until I decided to do some creative writing in the ways that I was accustomed to communicating that I could answer the question: Why did I decide to do a Ph.D. program?

There are two aims of this article. The first aim is to link article one and two in an attempt to detail why I ultimately decided not to use Translanguaging as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. The second aim of this article is to illustrate how I arrived here. By *here*, I mean just that. Here. Now. I bear the weight of my past on my shoulders. It comfortably rests there and

does not act as a burden. Instead, it's a reservoir of wisdom that provides foresight. My past shapes how I view the world and my research. Injecting my past into this work is the best way to show its authenticity.

As such, I chose an arts-based lens to theorize my experiences as a researcher-practitioner and to address the question of why I decided to do this program. It was only when I circled back, nearing the end of my journey, that I gained the wisdom to understand the answer. While many fields employed the arts as a research method, as a field ABR got its recognition circa the 1990s. Leavy (2009) defines art-based research (ABR) as

A set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined (p. 2-3).

McNiff (McNiff, 2018) argued that the value of ABR lies in its ability to articulate the significance of practice through creative expression. Similarly, Bhattacharya (2021) stated that ABR's value lies in its ability to explore new avenues of sense-making that are distinct from the conventional quantitative and qualitative. Bhattacharya (2021) also emphasized ABR's capacity to portray participant voices in ways that offer different meanings. In this chapter, the participant's voice is my own, and I use it to describe the significance of my practice. The endeavor to use my voice to uncover practice is in accordance with my mentioned gripes with academia, as ABR can challenge the conventional nature of academia that produces knowledge solely by and for academics (Heines et al., 2024).

While other scholars will read this article, the intended audience is me—that is—I wrote this chapter primarily for myself. It’s driven by memory.

### **Vignette 1: Connecting to Translanguaging**

Upon entering this Ph.D. program, we were filtered into unofficial groups based on our interests. I appreciated this filtering process because it gave me some semblance of community in a space that I was unfamiliar with. In my cohort, we colloquially referred to the groups as the ‘math people,’ the ‘literacy people,’ and the ‘liberatory practices people,’ amongst others. Based on my background and expressed interest to the university, I was filtered into the ‘language people’ group. These are the folks who were also interested in studying language throughout the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education (CITE) program. Within the language group, there were several sub-divisions. Some scholars study language as a theory, language as a tool, and second language acquisition, linguistics, etc. I didn’t quite fit into any of these molds, which was never an issue for me. When someone asked me about my interests, I always said, “I research language as it relates to K-12 education specifically.” This means that my interests lie in the language we use inside K-12 schools and the language we use to talk about K-12 schools.

Upon interacting with the people in my group, someone mentioned that they were a translanguaging scholar. Intrigued, I had never heard this term before. When I inquired what translanguaging was, the person found it interesting that I had been teaching English as a second language for about ten years and had never heard of it. In hindsight, this was a formative moment in my Ph.D. journey. I began researching translanguaging and learning everything I could about the concept. I was excited about the opportunity to *also* become a translanguaging scholar, as I already had the practical expertise to ground the new theoretical knowledge I was learning. I spent about a semester immersing myself in the idea and planned to use translanguaging in the

classroom as a pedagogical tool during instruction. After intense research, I became deflated about the thought of translanguaging.

### **My Initial Intentions of Translanguaging**

Upon reading the literature, my understanding of the potential of translanguaging started to take form. Generally, I was intrigued by translanguaging's ability to enhance student cognitive skills and language structure knowledge, something talked about extensively by Cummins, for example (Cummins, 1979, 2014, 2019). I was excited about the possibility of using translanguaging as a mechanism to foster more thorough meaning when students are learning in the classroom (Esquinca et al., 2014). I began to understand that translanguaging had the potential to allow teachers the ability to present directions and discussions in a way that allows for better student understanding, while simultaneously giving students more skills to participate in discussions and demonstrate knowledge with more clarity (De Los Reyes, 2019). For example, De Los Reyes (2019) found that in a bilingual classroom in the Philippines, students naturally participated in language practices that would be categorized as translanguaging. De Los Reyes argued the value of translanguaging practices is validated in that language speakers *naturally* do it, which indicates that continued focus on these practices could be beneficial. It also generally just felt like an inclusive practice that I could easily implement where the value gained vastly outweighed the effort needed to learn about and implement the practice (CITE Menken 2015, Garcia, 2009, 2015, 2019).

As fully explicated in Article One, something did not sit right with me. At the time, I couldn't figure out why. Translanguaging is a prominent buzzword in the field, and it seemed like everyone loved it except for me. As I continued to research, I couldn't shake this feeling of deflation. I assumed I felt this way because I had not implemented translanguaging in the

classroom. I intended to learn all I could about translanguaging as a pedagogical tool to implement in a researcher-practitioner study.

### **Assessing My Initial Use of Translanguaging**

When I got into the classroom to conduct my study, I quickly rejected translanguaging as a pedagogical tool. The room I was working in was a fifth-grade general education classroom that was very diverse, with about eight different home languages spoken among the students<sup>5</sup>. I observed the pattern in which the students' preferred method of communication was to use English. Even students who spoke the same language at home spoke English with one another in the classroom. The classroom's lead teacher (Jenn) is very welcoming to students speaking languages other than English. For about a month, I tried speaking Spanish to some students to make clear that the blending of languages is acceptable. I attempted to make it clear that we are all learners of language and tried to have students teach me simple phrases and words in their home languages. I tried encouraging other students to write in their home languages and communicate using them, but none were interested. Some expressed annoyance and others looked uncomfortable at times when prompted to do this.

Quickly, I felt the pattern of students preferring to use English suggested the linguistic sociocultural reality of my classroom was such that translanguaging just did not fit. From that vantage point, it felt that my initial intentions of using translanguaging in the classroom would no longer be a benefit. I did not think it was my duty to change this linguistic reality of the classroom, and even if I did think it was my duty, I do not believe I had the time to change this perception.

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<sup>5</sup> The next Article (Article Three) of this dissertation consists of a case study about the experiences of working with a small group of five students. In Article Three, I go into great contextual detail about the classroom. Here, only a cursory explanation is in order.

## Sociocultural Reality

Hawkins (2010) argued that a sociocultural view of language posits that language use is about situated meaning-making where constructed meaning in communication is not *just* based on the language used, *but also* the location where that language is used. In reference to the sociocultural view of language within classrooms, Hawkins stated that we cannot view what happens in the classroom as distinct and separate from what happens outside the classroom – this understanding reflects my hesitancy to attempt to change student perceptions of their language use. My sense was that students felt English was the optimal form of communication in the classroom.

It is interesting to me if/why students might have this perception. As a researcher and as a practitioner, it was outside the scope of my interests. Buenaventura (1965) stated that language is a guide to social reality, arguing that all aspects of a person's life are reflected in their language use. He continues and argues that the “real world” is built upon the language habits of the group, and we experience language the way we do, primarily due to the habits of our speech community. The speech community of our classroom showed that it preferred English as a medium of communication. I accepted that and do not think it was my duty to change it. I also do not think I had the time to change that.

I work in a system (the education system) that may not have the infrastructure that encourages teachers to sit down and take the time necessary to decipher *why* students might feel this way and attempt to make a change. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade teaching team needs to generally stay on the same pace to encourage better planning. The curriculum director of the school needs to aggregate our fifth-grade assessment data to ensure that our students are getting taught the requisite knowledge that will allow them to be successful in sixth grade. The state expects 100%

of students to be on or above grade level on the standardized assessments. We can quibble about the effectiveness of the system. But still, the reality is that as practitioners working in the system, we face non-negotiable responsibilities that preclude an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions of their language use. I need to teach.

### **Disingenuous Paradox**

I believe translanguaging rightfully argues for and supports the increased understanding of linguistic diversity. However, in the instance of my classroom, I felt that using it simply would not have been generative. The small group I worked with was comprised of students whose home languages were Spanish, Pashto, Karen, Hmong, and English. It felt like a cumbersome task to think about these different home languages and ways to enable their use. I did not think that I could facilitate learning using their home languages in a meaningful way. At one point, I asked the student whose home language was Pashto to write a response using it. He shared that he did not know how to write it, and I certainly was not equipped to facilitate this kind of learning. From my field notes, I found the question, “Should I use Google Translate to help with understanding these home languages?” This question epitomizes how I feel about this situation. If I used Google Translate in any way to facilitate learning, I would feel cheap, forced, and disingenuous about it. And this made me feel like it was a paradox of sorts. I wanted to believe in translanguaging, and it made sense to me. However, the moment I attempted to apply it with a language I did not know, I felt insincere, so I rejected it. Whether unfounded or not, it did not feel like my duty to facilitate the learning of a language that I also had no knowledge of.

### **My Duty**

As a teacher of minoritized language speakers, I believe I must alert and sensitize my students to the differences in communication styles, expectations, and perceptions of *their*

language use (Khemlani, 2004). This is in addition to teaching them the target language, which has always been English. I believe the ability to be aware of language and linguistically adapt based on setting and context is essential. My sense tells me (along with the data cited in chapter one) that language speakers are more successful if they can navigate these varying contexts.

While I might agree there should be a collective duty to ensure the world is more accommodating for minoritized language speakers, I view this as an unrealistic expectation. As such, equipping my students (who are usually minoritized language speakers) with an awareness of language and its varied perceptions provides them with the skills to adapt according to their environment.

### **Language Awareness**

I think it's essential for individuals to equip themselves with linguistic adaptability. From my perspective, to be linguistically adaptable, one must have an awareness of language – The ability to perceive it in various contexts and to deploy it effectively in different ways. This description might seem a bit tenuous or precarious even. However, language awareness is simple to understand but difficult to articulate precisely despite a vast literature base. Formally, language awareness is defined as “explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use” (Association for Language Awareness, n.d.). This formal definition aligns with my understanding of language awareness, which I initially developed through my experiences as a teacher. It was not until my second year in this Ph.D. program that I encountered the theory in an academic context. My sentiments toward language awareness might perhaps best be exemplified in a quote from Van Lier, “the importance of the intuitive feeling for language, the skillful control of creativity and convention” (van Lier, 1998, p. 136). In essence, language awareness is an intuitive

understanding that empowers students, enabling them to use language to their advantage despite the challenges they may face. This empowerment is particularly crucial in educational settings, where linguistic inequality is pervasive (Cummins, 2000, 2007).

A view that values an awareness of language fundamentally challenges standard monolingual language ideologies because it sets multilingualism as the norm rather than the exception. This viewpoint aligns with the consensus among prominent contemporary language scholars (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Garcia, 2009). As linguistic diversity increases in various locations, the likelihood of encountering multilingual environments also rises (W. Baker, 2012). In this context, Kidwell and Triyoko (2024) conceptualize language awareness as a resource facilitating cultural learning. They argue that as cultural learning deepens, language awareness emerges, enhancing individuals' capacity to engage linguistically with people from different cultures. This viewpoint resonates with me and describes my principal focus in the classrooms that I teach. Language awareness restores power back to the students in a tangible way because it makes the individual more sensitive to the language intricacies of others. With this sensitivity, language awareness empowers students—both minoritized and native speakers—by equipping them with the tools to adapt their communication in diverse environments. In this way, everyone benefits

Language awareness is a straightforward concept and does not need to be a grandiose theoretical framework. While viewing language itself as a resource has faced some criticism (Ricento, 2005), the notion of making people more aware of language—and thereby benefiting others—is widely accessible. Unlike more complex theories like translanguaging, which make broad claims about transformative power, language awareness offers a practical approach with tangible, albeit gradual, outcomes. It might be slower and steadier, but amidst the intense debates

surrounding translanguaging, language awareness stands out as a unifying, common-sense approach that many can endorse.

### **Vignette 2: Connecting to Teaching**

There's no shortage of critical rhetoric surrounding the current state of K-12 education, and rightfully so. While many aspects of the K-12 landscape deserve critique and need significant change, I continue to view K-12 education through a positive lens. I still hold an idealistic view of schooling. Between my educational experience and career, I have spent more time in schools than in any other location – even my home. K-12 is still a space that can restore power back to the populous. K-12 is still a setting that allows me to fulfill my *why*: to give students the skills to create their own opportunities. That is the essence of power.

Schools and classrooms are deeply important to me. I never truly said to myself, “I am going to become a teacher.” It feels like something designed for my future without a conscious effort, unfolding through a series of life events. Below is a tale from my life detailing *how* I started working in schools at such a young age, underscoring my enduring interest in the field.

I lied on my resume—a cardinal sin. Besides my high school diploma and listing the sports I played, I fabricated all 400 words on the sheet. I lied about a position I held at a family company. I said I was a supervisor. I hadn't supervised anyone. I lied about four years of service at a church. I had only volunteered for four hours. I even lied about having a CPR certification. I've never learned how to resuscitate anyone. Based on the lore about lying on resumes, this should have been the early death of my non-existent career.

When I was applying to colleges, I was 17, with an unimpressive GPA, no support from the school counselors, and about two months of total school suspension time under my belt. A friend advised me that colleges require a “resume” for the application process. I had never heard

of such a thing. He told me it's a list of all your accomplishments. I did not think colleges would find it appealing to learn about my school suspensions, so I did what I had to do. I had to lie because I had a rocky four-year stretch from seventh grade to tenth.

When people ask about my experience during those four years, I am usually sparse with details as these are not my proudest moments, and I do not like who I was at that point in my life. As a freshman, I was 13 and had already fought the same kid three times before winter break. It wasn't uncommon for me to carry a weapon to school. I was not there to learn, and I certainly was not there thinking about how to pave my path to college. I never got any accolades. I wasn't anyone's favorite. There was never any hype around my name. I was never the first choice for anything. I wasn't in any social clubs that colleges like to see. I had never really volunteered anywhere. And besides sports, I did not have a single thing that I was proud to tell people about.

At some point around the end of tenth grade, I decided to do better, and this decision – which I ironically don't remember making – might be the most critical decision I've ever made. My eleventh and twelfth-grade years are some of the fondest memories of my life. Everything was in synchrony. I started getting straight A's again, I was doing remarkably well in sports, and most importantly, I was no longer doing bad things. I was just a happy person.

There was, however, still some lingering collateral damage from my past that would creep up occasionally. Namely, the fact that for two years, when I should have been giving back to my community or taking care of others, I wasn't. During this part of my life, it wasn't evident to me if I was a good person or not. But I understood the importance of appearing like one, so the guilt of lying on my resume was a small price to pay for a ticket out of the neighborhood I grew up in. The college administrators didn't call my references to check the validity of my claims – It was the perfect lie.

In the first week of my first semester of college, I crossed paths with an afterschool homework help volunteering service as they were passing out flyers to get more tutors to volunteer after school. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to wash away my sins and actually *try* to be a good person rather than *wonder* if I was. In hindsight, I think I was actually a good person then, but the confusion I felt compelled me to consistently volunteer my time at something I deemed noble – teaching. This is the reason I’ve been teaching *in some form* since I was 17. I’m approaching 34. Working in, teaching in, and thinking about schools has been the norm for half my life. While the lies on my resume aren’t directly related to my research interests, they are the reason I have so much experience in schools.

### **Vignette 3: Bend but Don’t Break**

When architects design bridges, they determine how much weight they can hold relative to their size. To find how much weight the bridge can carry, the architects need to find its breaking point. One of the marks of a sturdy bridge is actually its ability to sway and bend with the many demands placed on it—semi-trucks, traffic, natural disasters, etc. When you’re on a bridge, and you feel it swaying, it feels scary. It feels like the bridge is not supposed to move – it’s counterintuitive. But we trust that the architects have found the bridge’s breaking point, which is actually five times the amount of stress on the bridge than what is currently on it.

I haven’t found my breaking point yet, and I am not sure I want to, but I have come pretty damn close through constant tension. With every challenge, my breaking point becomes clearer. It also becomes more distant. Challenges that would have been difficult for me ten years ago sometimes don’t even register now, and that’s a good feeling. I’ve learned that tension is a great teacher. I am stronger than I was then. And I am stronger than I was yesterday. As will become evident after reading the next memoir, I’ve had to rely on myself from a young age. This has

fostered an **unwavering** deep trust in myself. One day, I came to my advisor after *starting* and *finishing* a big project. I did it all on my own and did not once reach out for help. He said something to me like, “This is pretty good. You’re very resourceful, Stephen, but you know it’s ok to reach out for help, right?” It was here that I realized I am just used to taking care of myself. I don’t find much comfort in reaching out for help, but I know I can’t do it alone. It’s an interesting paradox that I have yet to work through.

The final vignette of this article notes how this Ph.D. journey I’ve embarked on might be the second most challenging thing I have done thus far in my life. I could not have done this without resilience. I know that I am resilient. I *think* I know why I am resilient, but I don’t actually know where it comes from. It feels like something internal. Something designed for me that I can’t possibly begin to understand. Either way, I know it’s there.

Through years of perpetual fine-tuning and sharpening, I have constantly challenged myself to see how much weight I can hold relative to my size. I could not have finished this program without learning about my breaking point and the resilience required to find it. I mentioned that I think I know why I am resilient. Below is the tale, where it began to be fostered.

#### **Vignette 4: Monsters Under the Bed**

I was a boy. I watched it go round and round, and round and round. I would try to lock my eyes on the ridge of dust ever so lightly resting on the edge of the wing. I would stare at it every night. When the world should have been silent, the whir of the motor was somehow soothing. Two chains on either side would consistently hit the glass and make a clang – It didn’t bother me. The wing’s interior had that traditional honeycombed pattern that perfectly complimented the white exterior. The cool air it provided felt like a relief from my suffocating

surroundings. Asphyxiation by life was a fear at the time. I used to stare at that ceiling fan every night.

I could see the fan clearly because I slept with the light on every night for about three years. It felt like a warm hug from a friend. A hug I could always rely on. I wasn't sure about many things at this point in my life. But I was sure that the sun would go down that night, and I was sure I had the light to protect me. The light was essential because it was all I had to keep the monsters away. The light was protecting me from things that go bump in the night and the beast under my bed—so I thought.

At 12 years old, I was still waiting for my body to change. No hairs had sprouted above my lip or on my chin. My voice never cracked and wasn't getting deeper, and I still hadn't gotten hair under my arms. I was a child, maybe even still a baby. I had *just* started sleeping in my own bed for a full night when my mother passed away. And I lost my father less than 365 days before. I was still afraid of the dark, and I hated it. I hated the dark and the fact that I was afraid of it.

I had plenty of family and friends around to support me. My grandparents had six kids, and all those kids had kids. I have a big family with lots of cousins and family members around. I was not alone, but I couldn't escape this feeling of desolation, knowing the people who birthed me were no longer on this earth. I needed to be a man, like my grandfather, and real men are not afraid of the dark, right? I had to navigate this confusing path by myself. I realized there was no warm hug to expect. No thoughtful kiss on the forehead anymore, and certainly no one around to keep the monsters at bay.

I was particularly terrified of vampires. In this era, vampires weren't trendy or stylish. They didn't have fashionable haircuts or wear the latest threads. They only had that slicked-back

haircut showing off their widow's peak and pasty white skin. They wore a cape with a massive collar that went up to their ears and you could tell they were always oddly hugging themselves under the cape. By nature, vampires are relegated to the dark. So much so, that they aren't even able to touch sunlight. The issue with them being consigned to the dark, is that you never know if they're lurking. How was I supposed to leave my room if it's dark out there?

On the way to the bathroom, I would turn on every light switch. I would even turn on lights in tangential rooms not directly on the way to the bathroom. The brighter the path, the better. On the way back from the bathroom, it was a race against the light. The vampires never caught me. Judging by my undefeated record, I might be the only person in history who is actually faster than the speed of light. I would have to make this trek every night at some point and often multiple times. I always took the same process to navigate the issue.

The ghosts used to bother me, too. They were transparent white apparitions. Maybe with a slight blue tint sometimes. The ghosts were almost certainly always an older person who was previously alive. I never knew who they were specifically. They could have been an evil ghost or a nice one, but I did not want to find out. Dealing with them was tricky because they might be in the room with me, even if the lights were on. They were in my domain. I never entirely had a remedy to deal with them. The only thing I could think to do was to keep my eyes open. At least this way, they couldn't sneak up on me unexpectedly. You can imagine the issues this caused. I learned from experience it is indeed difficult to sleep with your eyes open – I tried.

I understood that I was a little boy, and I knew that I had to become a man; I don't know how I knew this, but despite it, I was still so scared. I was scared of the dark, I was scared of the future, I was scared of everything, and a real man wasn't scared. How would I ever survive if something as simple as closing my eyes made me this uncomfortable? I was vaulted into

independence before I was ready. There was no acculturation period. There was no time to get acclimated, and I had no choice in any of this. Everything was out of my control, and nothing was in it. But a real man moves on and is not mired by these types of issues, right?

There was a lot of confusion at this point about what I was supposed to be doing and how I was supposed to be healing. I knew that I had been dealt a lousy deck of cards. I knew that I had a bad roll of the dice, and somehow, I knew that no one was coming to save me. No one comes. No one can make the pain go away, and no one can make you feel better. The only person I knew I had to rely on was myself – a man, right?

I *am* now a man, and I have the wisdom to understand that the vampires and ghosts I was forced to combat would only be the first of many battles. The daily battles with the vampires and ghosts shape shifted into different challenges as I got older. Maybe the new challenges might've looked like struggling to find my footing in high school or deciphering who I was in college. Or perhaps it looks like a Ph.D. program. Regardless of the form they take, I know that if I'm doing life the right way, many more challenges will come. I bear many scars and battle wounds from my countless expeditions. There was a lot of collateral damage along the way, but I am here. The current battle is this dissertation, the pinnacle of years of many different struggles throughout the years.

The forthcoming article, I consider my magnum opus. During my first year of the Ph.D. program, I regularly questioned my decision to leave k-12. I was working in the perfect classroom, my co-teachers on my team were perfect, and I somehow landed in the perfect school. Leaving that situation was difficult. Only when I finished year two, did I decide to see it through. I missed teaching throughout this whole Ph.D. program. Because of that, I knew that I wanted to conduct a researcher-practitioner study of some sort, but I didn't know what.

With the help of my advisor, I kind of jumped off the cliff and built my wings on the way down. It was a difficult process. At certain points, I was spending upwards of 20 hours a week in the classroom working with the partner teacher. I felt aimless at times because teaching is messy. It's chaotic, and you can be sure that every day differs from the last. To top it off, explaining my research to peers, I always dealt with comments like, "Wow, that's a lot of time. You sure that's a good use of it?" Conversations of this nature actually solidified my understanding that I was conducting the correct type of research. There was no place I would have rather been. Teaching is meaningful. Teaching is meaningful to me, also. It requires a specific type of care that simply cannot be rushed.

In the introduction to this article, I never actually mentioned what my response was when people asked me why I joined a Ph.D. program. I always said, "I had a lot of questions about the field, and I didn't have a platform to find the answers." Which *sounds* great, but it never *felt* right. As Kearny and Hyle (2004) articulated, ABR allows the researcher to share their thoughts and experiences in an expressive and personally relevant manner, which is what I was afforded throughout this piece.

I am still unsure why I always felt that I did not fit in Academia, nor do it really matter to me at this point. But I am sure what it taught me. It taught me about my relationship to language. And it taught me that the resilience I learned at a young age is what was carrying me through the ebbs and the flows—all as a means to reach the finish line. In a circular moment, as I sit here in my new classroom and type these words from the heart, I realize that now when people ask me the question, I'll say

**"I decided to do it because I had to learn about the love I have for teaching."**

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## **ARTICLE THREE: TRIAL AND ERROR: EXPLORING THE PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF IMPLEMENTING DIGITALLY-SOURCED CURRICULA**

### **Contextual Narrative**

It's Tuesday, the most challenging day of the week. Tuesday is more difficult than Monday because the rest we got over the weekend can carry us through a tough start to the week. But by Tuesday, the work week's antics are already starting to weigh on us. And we still have three more days of this after today. The throes of the workweek can beat us down, but at least this is the best profession in the world.

It was a challenging morning in December, and the class was trying to get through three more lessons to meet our pacing guide. The state standardized testing window was fast approaching—it would be April in no time. We worked tirelessly to ensure we provided students with the best possible instruction, and I think we achieved that.

It was time to bring students down to lunch. While they were eating and at recess, we knew we had a 40-minute reprieve waiting. We always debriefed about the morning's shenanigans on our way back to the classroom. I was looking forward to being back in the room *without* the students. There is a beautiful silence in an empty classroom. The stillness reflects a rigorous morning of learning. Amidst our many responsibilities, this is our time to relax—we've earned this. Sometimes, as a teacher, a break is more than the universe is willing to give you. Ping! She looked down at her phone while closing the door, commencing our break, and blurted out, "Apparently we're done with the ELA curriculum, and we're starting a new one next week!?"

## **Contextual Setting**

This case study investigates the curriculum implementation process of our researcher-practitioner team when navigating an unexpected mid-year curriculum change, specifically focusing on the supplementation of our ELA curriculum. My colleague, Jenn (a pseudonym), and I began our partnership in the 2022-2023 school year; however, this case study focuses on our work during the 2023-2024 school year. Our partnership began through an introduction by the school's principal. I was an instructional coach for a different teacher in the school. Through my practice as an instructional coach, I formed a good rapport with the school principal and shared my research interests with her. Specifically, I wanted to volunteer my time inside a classroom and contribute to student learning. As noted in Article Two, at this juncture I was still holding on to the prospect of using translanguaging for pedagogical purposes. At the time, this hope felt too specific to share with the principal, so I did not tell her this was my goal. I was worried this intent could feel too cumbersome and would lead to the principal saying that she did not think it was a good idea for me to work with a teacher. As such, I decided to focus on the utility that I would be able to provide by working in the classroom. I shared that my primary goal was to get into a classroom and provide meaningful support in any capacity possible. I figured that once I was able to show that I am a capable teacher, I could then focus on translanguaging. Based on my conversations with the principal, I assumed most of my efforts would be dedicated to providing instructional and behavior management support. Recognizing the potential for a productive partnership, the principal introduced me to Jenn, who showed interest in working with me.

While my description above about the intricacies of finding a teacher to partner with might seem as though my decisions and actions were deliberate, it is important to note that at this

juncture, I was not sure I was following the correct processes. At the time, I was a third-year Ph.D. student and had never conducted research of this magnitude. My confidence *only* revolved around my ability teach students and my ability teach other teachers how to teach students.

Jenn was a fourth-year teacher who had been working at the same school since finishing her teacher preparation program. She taught third grade for one year before transitioning to fifth-grade, where she has remained since. Jenn identifies as a white woman who speaks English as a first language and German as an additional language. Jenn completed a highly-ranked traditional teacher preparation program and regularly participated in her school's mandatory professional development initiatives. As a dedicated professional, Jenn takes her teaching responsibilities seriously and actively seeks ways to improve her instruction. She pursues feedback regularly from peers, administrators, and students to inform her teaching.

I consider myself a jack-of-all-trades in education. My experience spans a multitude of roles, including substitute teacher, classroom teacher, school administrator, instructional coach, and manager of various curriculum departments. I have taught pre-service and in-service teachers, and I have international experience in some of these roles. In the U.S., all my experience is situated in inner-city schools, most of which are Title I schools, serving students categorized as low socioeconomic status (SES).

I am also a Black male. My positionality in elementary schools is sometimes complex to articulate. In a setting where the student population is becoming more diverse than in the past, and the racial diversity of teachers remains low, I always feel a sense of heightened responsibility in the school. I was not brave enough to ask for this positionality; Rather, it's just the way it is. To be sure, no one has ever insinuated that I bear responsibility or suggested that I consider this perspective. Instead, it's just something that I have felt over the years.

I am aware that in some respects, my job is easier because of this descriptor. I have the cultural capital to connect with students in a way that some other teachers may be unable to. My upbringing, which mirrors the challenging circumstances of many students in my classrooms, fosters a shared understanding and connection that I do not observe as frequently between other teachers and their students.

While classroom management is not the focus of this research, something that Jenn and I regularly had casual conversations about was our differences in classroom management styles. Jenn nor I often raise our voices or feel the need to yell in the classroom. However, I do consider myself a classic strict teacher and I do have a “my way or the highway” demeanor and I do speak firmly. I am very structured and orderly, and my view is that the structure provides systems for the classroom to run smoothly. While Jenn makes her expectations clear with students, she openly shared that she is less orderly and likes to give students a say in the daily workings. She would also allow students to do a bit of “talking back,” which would always alert my senses, but it was not my classroom so I would not intervene. Our differences in classroom management styles proved fruitful for me as I was able question my own practices and ask if I needed to evolve them in any way. It is my personal belief that that a teacher should continually attempt to improve their skills and with that notion, I took our classroom management style differences as an opportunity to dissect my normal practices and decipher if I needed to alter them at all. This process is not scientific in any way, but I would try to mimic some of her actions, tone of speaking, conversation structures, etc. to test the outcome and decide if I thought it was beneficial. In the end, I concluded that it is still best for me to continue to be a strict and firm teacher as opposed to a more lenient teacher. During this experience, I realized that it was

beneficial for me to continue to my practices of being firm and strict. Being a lenient teacher may work for some people, but I do not think that it suits me.

I approach this work through the perspective that I am here as an additive component to the classroom. I am ready to assist however I am needed. My involvement in the classroom is through the lens of a researcher with an extensive understanding of the job that I am doing as a practitioner. Sometimes, I am required to teach large groups, small groups, administer assessments, and sometimes take students on walks around the school who need a break.

In the school, 92% of the students in the school qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The school's mission is like other public institutions of education to deliver high-quality instruction in a supportive setting to aid students in becoming global citizens. The goal is cultivating innovative, independent, confident, compassionate, and collaborative students. The school informally houses many of the district's multilingual learners from various countries.

We were one of four fifth-grade classrooms in the K-8 school. The demographics of our classroom were diverse. Most students in the class were multilingual and came from many ethnic backgrounds. There were 26 students in total, with eight native languages spoken by the students: Arabic, Swahili, Spanish, Kirundi, Sango, Portuguese, Pashto, and Kinyarwanda. The common language used in class and among students was English. No students in the class identified as white. Generally, I would describe it as a happy classroom. The students appear to be happy to be there every day. Typically, they all enjoyed learning, and we did not have to deal with too many behavioral issues that stopped us from teaching and students from learning.

This case study describes how we navigated the implications of unexpectedly starting a new ELA curriculum midway through the school year. We were already managing a substantial workload when we were informed of the impending curriculum change, and this unforeseen

adjustment felt overwhelming. To add, we only had about half a week's worth of material left to teach and were uncertain about the arrival time of the new curriculum. Between mathematics, science, and social studies, we did not feel we had the time to plan new lessons from scratch until the new curriculum arrived. Consequently, we felt pressured to find immediate solutions and sought supplemental curriculum materials through TeachersPayTeachers.com (TPT). When we chose to source materials from TPT, we were unaware of the implications. At the time of making the decision, both of us had used TPT in the past, although not in the same capacity, so our disposition towards the website was relatively positive.

The time constraints of our job left us unable to create instructional materials from scratch. As a result, we relied on sourcing materials from TPT to continue with our instruction. This study examines the implications of using these supplemental curriculum materials during instruction. While TPT effectively serves as a time-efficient resource for locating supplemental materials, our use of these materials uncovered several challenges.

### **Research Questions**

As Yin (2009) articulated, research questions form the foundation of case study design as they guide the methodological approach the researcher must utilize. Additionally, the research question delineates the study's unit of analysis, which defines the system under investigation. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study are as follows.

- RQ 1. How does a teaching team navigate changing ELA curricula, midyear, drawing on curriculum materials from Teachers Pay Teachers?
- RQ 2. How do students respond to a midyear ELA curriculum change that uses curriculum materials from Teachers Pay Teachers?

## **Literature Review**

Implementing curriculum, adapting that curriculum to fit student needs and supplementing that curriculum when it does not fit student needs are long-standing practices that teachers enact. Surrounding these three teacher practices, a robust and well-established literature-base exists that retroactively informed this study, providing the language to discuss what occurred in the classroom. Given this research was conducted in a single classroom, it is critical to understand the broader context of K-12 education, which has created the necessity for the noted adaptive practices. As such, this section begins by detailing some of key challenges facing the current landscape of K-12 education which have created the need for these practices. To follow, a detailed review of curriculum implementation, adaption and supplementation provide the necessary context to understand how TPT can influence classroom practice.

### **Challenges of Teaching**

In recent years, teachers have faced a relentless array of demands and pressures in the profession, leading to stress (Coates & Thoresen, 1976; Collie et al., 2012; Heffernan et al., 2022; McIntyre et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018; Thompson et al., 2023). Such demands include, but are not limited to, the need to stay current with relevant content (Chall, 1996; Slavin, 1989; Stahl, 1998), coping with increased class sizes (Bold, 2018; Chimbi & Jita, 2021; Jepson, 2015; Marais, 2016), adhering to new accountability measures (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Young & Lewis, 2015), high-stakes standardized assessment expectations (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2008; Putwain & Roberts, 2009; Ryan et al., 2017), and managing an overall increased workload (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023; Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Betoret, 2009; Fernet et al., 2012, 2013; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Toropova et al., 2021). Research indicates that, due to these escalating demands, teachers are struggling to keep stress at a minimum (Admiraal & Kittelsen

Røberg, 2023; Collie et al., 2012; McIntyre et al., 2017; Stacey et al., 2022). As the role of teaching becomes increasingly more complex (Bar-Yam et al., 2002), time for essential duties becomes increasingly limited (Heffernan et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018; Thompson et al., 2023), prompting many to turn to online platforms for curriculum materials<sup>6</sup> to save time (Silver, 2022).

The growing prevalence of teachers seeking online resources is becoming increasingly evident (Hodge et al., 2019; Knake et al., 2021; A. J. Rodriguez, 2015; Sawyer, Dick, et al., 2020, 2020; Sawyer & Myers, 2018; Shelton et al., 2022; Shelton & Archambault, 2019). Immediately following the adoption of Common Core, a survey of 403 middle school math teachers revealed that over 60% regularly supplemented their instruction with internet-downloaded materials, often because their school had not yet adapted Common Core-aligned textbooks (Davis et al., 2017). A different study, drawing on data from a nationally representative teacher panel, found that more than 85% of teachers utilized digital materials, slightly more than half of which were supplementary, neither mandated nor suggested by the school (Tosh et al., 2020). This proportion was higher for teachers of students with low socioeconomic status (Tosh et al., 2020). Furthermore, a third nationally representative study indicated that the percentage of math teachers who frequently utilize the virtual resource platform TPT increased from 41% in 2015 to 60% in 2017. English teachers displayed a similar increase, from 42% to 55% (Kaufman et al., 2020). TPT is a virtual commercial marketplace allowing sellers to upload curriculum materials to personalized online shops, enabling others to explore, buy, and download them for classroom use (Brown et al., 2023).

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<sup>6</sup> *Curriculum materials* refer to both printed and digital resources for teachers and students, from any curriculum that align with various educational goals and policies, including content standards and framework.

TPT orients itself around time-saving efficiency, which scholars have identified as the primary appeal for teachers seeking curriculum materials for supplementation (Brown et al., 2023; Silver, 2022). TPT streamlines informational resources and choices available to buyers, aiming to expedite decision-making. As a result, TPT minimizes contextual seller details, accentuating positive reviews to emphasize quick and efficient purchases intended to save teachers time (Silver, 2021).

Actual use of curriculum materials at the classroom level is under-researched (Li, 2021), and a separate burgeoning area of inquiry is beginning to scrutinize TPT and interrogate the quality of its resources (Harris et al., 2023; Knake et al., 2021; Schroeder & Curcio, 2022; Shelton et al., 2022; Tosh et al., 2020). The undertaking of this current research is to contribute to the nascent literature in this area. This research resides at the intersections of curriculum implementation, adaption, and supplementation. Narrative case study is employed to underscore the diverse perspectives of teaching, capture the complexity that describes teaching, and highlight the lived experience of teachers in the K-12 context.

### **Curriculum Implementation**

This research sits within the curriculum implementation literature. Historically, there have been four perspectives on the role of the use and implementation of curriculum materials in relation to teachers (Budak, 2015; Davis, 2006; Hondrich et al., 2016; Nevenglosky et al., 2019; Zeibarth et al., 2012). The first perspective portrays curriculum materials as a “remote control” that seeks to limit teacher discretion over the curriculum (Dow, 1991; Welch, 1979). Under this perspective, the curriculum should faithfully be implemented as it is written by the curriculum developers. This view assumes there is a “right way” for teachers to use these externally designed materials (Zeibarth et al., 2012). While the remote control method might be able to

foster efficient, widespread dissemination of curriculum under a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, it is bound to encounter classroom resistance as it overlooks unique classroom needs (Brown & Edelson, 2003).

At the other extreme, the second perspective posits that teachers should develop the curriculum instead of formal curriculum developers (Budak, 2015; E. Davis, 2006; Nevenglosky et al., 2019; Zeibarth et al., 2012). However, some research has shown that curriculum creation falls outside the typical teacher’s comfort zone (Prawat, 1993). Bolin and Falk (1987) contended that the curriculum is far too meaningful of an endeavor to be solely entrusted to curriculum developers who lack the contextual understanding of individual classrooms. From this vantage point, teachers should have total control over the development and implementation of the curriculum.

The third perspective presents a more flexible compromise that allows teachers to adapt curriculum materials developed by others (Davis, 2006; Zeibarth et al., 2012). This perspective is likely to enhance instruction at the local level, as teachers know their environment best (Brown & Edelson, 2003). Adapting curriculum creates practical challenges at the classroom level as the demands of many teachers begin to pile.

A fourth perspective on curriculum implementation comes from the ‘reconceptualist movement.’ The reconceptualist movement is presented as an alternative understanding of curriculum compared to the traditional and technical perspectives above (Green, 2018). The reconceptualist movement responds to the perspective that views teachers solely as functions of curriculum input/output and inserts a focus on how curriculum is experienced (Shaker & Kridel, 1989). At its essence the reconceptualist movement, intends to critique the deep structure of educational and social life with the intent to improve it (Pinar, 1979). “It shares with critical

theory the view that criticism must not reify that which it identifies and explains. It must function to dissolve frozen structures” (Pinar, 1979, p. 96). The reconceptualist movement challenges the traditional notions of curriculum emphasizing it as an experience. Whichever perspective is utilized, something clear is the critical intersection of the curriculum, the teacher, and the students. This intersection must be experienced and enacted in various way, justifying its thorough scrutinization for effective educational practices.

### **Curriculum Adaption**

Teaching practices in the U.S. are dominated by commercially available curriculum programs (Goodlad, 1984). It is routine for school districts and schools to mandate the use of sanctioned curricular programs and materials (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988). When teachers use curriculum materials, they interact with the materials in a way that influences their decision-making (J. Remillard, 2005). Teachers rarely implement the curriculum as directly intended by developers (Connelly & Ben-Peretz, 1980), which gives way for teachers to use their judgment and adapt the curriculum as they see fit.

Research has consistently shown that teachers take an analytical stance towards curriculum materials, adapting them based on the specific needs of their local teaching environments (needs like student needs, class resources, time constraints, etc.) (Beyer & Davis, 2012, 2012; Drake & Sherin, 2006, 2009). Using a curriculum involves a series of practices, including selecting relevant parts, interpreting the materials, and adjusting them for instruction (Remillard, 2019). The term *adapting* is widely used in the literature, and multiple definitions describe a very similar set of processes in slightly different ways (Li, 2021). Some definitions of adapting suggest that teachers employ a variety of techniques to supplement, edit, expand, personalize, simplify, or modify materials to fit the local context (Madsen & Bowen, 1978).

Tomlinson (2011) noted omitting, modifying, reducing, or supplementing the materials. McGrath argued that adapting means teachers adapt the textbook contents and supplement, extend, or exploit the materials (McGrath, 2013). Beyer and Davis (2012a) contended that adapting involves modifying lesson plans to promote opportunities for student learning. Davis (2006) defined adapting as changes made to one's planning or in real-time enactment of a lesson plan. For the purposes of this study, the formal definition is as follows: Adapting is the act of a teacher using their professional judgment to modify curriculum materials to fit their local context.

There are numerous reasons why teachers must adapt their curriculum materials, and extensive research highlights this phenomenon. Studies have demonstrated that curriculum materials often neglect the role of the teacher in the teaching and learning process (McGrath, 2013). Additional research indicates that teachers need some pedagogical guidance within the curriculum in order to teach it, but this has been an oversight on the part of the curriculum developers (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Bell, 2015; Dow, 1991; Powell et al., 1985; Sarason, 1982). Furthermore, many materials disregard or sanitize alternative perspectives, lack high-quality examples of phenomena, and fail to support teachers in making sense of the content (Beyer et al., 2009; Hubisz, 2003; Kesidou & Roseman, 2002; Stern & Roseman, 2004). Although significant criticism targets low-quality curriculum materials, research suggests that even high-quality materials require adaptation (S. A. Barab & Luehmann, 2003; Baumgartner, 2004; E. Davis, 2006). Furthermore, evidence indicates that teachers can sometimes rely excessively on curriculum materials, particularly in mathematics, leading to an overemphasis on rote memorization of skills (Boaler, 1996; McNeal, 1995).

Research indicates that curriculum adaptation is an ordinary and necessary part of the teaching process. Teachers leverage their understanding of the classroom context and exercise

professional judgment to deliver optimal instruction. Generally, adaptation assumes that the curriculum is comprehensive enough to support teaching and learning, requiring only minor alterations based on specific contexts. However, when the curriculum is not sufficiently comprehensive, teachers often feel compelled to supplement it to enhance learning. In such cases, teachers must add additional materials and resources to ensure that students receive a robust educational experience.

### **Curriculum Supplementation**

Curriculum designers have specific intentions for how their materials should be used and perceived in the classroom (Dietiker & Riling, 2018; Hondrich et al., 2016; Zeibarth et al., 2012). Zeibarth et al. (2012) defined these intentions as the aims that the designers have for the instruction that will happen in the classroom, in addition to the ways in which teachers and students will perceive the curriculum. Research indicates that these intentions often diverge from those of teachers and students, sometimes even conflicting with them (Koch, 1996; Nie et al., 2013; J. T. Remillard & Bryans, 2004). Dietiker and Riling (2018) argued that the goals and vision of the teacher and students will necessarily differ from those of the curriculum designers, creating a *design tension*. Due to this design tension, teachers must adapt the curriculum to fit their local context.

It is crucial here to differentiate between adaptation and supplementation in the context of curriculum materials. Silver (2022) highlighted that significant research on teacher supplementation heavily revolves around the use of textbooks and has only commenced since approximately 2017. Consequently, Silver's recent literature review stands as the first attempt to evaluate supplementation-relevant literature and itemize definitions, theories and epistemological underpinnings. After reviewing over two dozen publications on teacher supplementation, it is

evident that the term is frequently used in context but rarely formally defined. Silver's formal definition is the only one identified. As such, Silver's formal definition will be used for this study. Supplementation is defined as "a premeditated, additive change that a teacher makes to their official curriculum materials" (p. 472). This definition focuses on the word *additive*, as supplementation occurs when teachers add their own sourced materials to the lesson that fall outside of the sanctioned curriculum.

Similar to adaption, there are a myriad of reasons that a teacher might supplement their school-sanctioned curriculum. Studies have shown that teachers supplement with unofficial materials because their schools have not provided them with all the official curriculum materials (Marple et al., 2017; Sawyer & Myers, 2018). Furthermore, research has indicated that teachers supplement their sanctioned curriculum to differentiate their instruction to fit student-specific learning needs (Marple et al., 2017; Polikoff & Dean, 2019; Recker et al., 2024; Sawyer, Dredger et al., 2020; Shapiro et al., 2019; Webel et al., 2015). There is also evidence that textbooks fail to align with common core state standards, prompting teachers to feel they need to supplement for students to do well on state standardized testing, which *is* aligned to common core state standards (Marple et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2019; Webel et al., 2015). Teachers have reported supplementing to save time (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022) or to feel some sense of autonomy over the curriculum they use (Carpenter et al., 2020).

Reasons for supplementation are not uniformly distributed across teachers (Silver, 2022), but it is clear that this practice is widespread and frequent. Research has shown that curriculum materials can often be confusing, poorly designed, and give unclear suggestions (Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988). Consequently, many teachers are turning to online platforms such as TPT to find

supplemental materials, as studies are beginning to indicate that even these resources come with significant challenges and risks.

### **Teachers Pay Teachers**

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2009-2010, textbook publishers were slow to make the changes demanded by the new standards (Polikoff, 2015). Hodge et al. (2019) argued that the adoption of the CCSS by the states disrupted the traditional dominance of curriculum publishing companies in the curriculum marketplace. This disruption ensued because teachers could access readily available online materials from various organizations instead of their now outdated textbooks (Hodge et al. 2019). As more and more teachers have matured in the digital age, their propensity to utilize the Internet to source material for instruction has heightened (Sawyer & Dredger, 2020).

Virtual commercial marketplaces are websites that facilitate the search for supplementary curriculum materials, lesson plans, classroom décor, etc., that offer quick and easy access to teacher-specific resources (Shelton & Archambault, 2019). While TPT is the most popular of these websites and the most commercially oriented, research shows that teachers also use social media platforms like Instagram (Carpenter et al., 2020), Pinterest (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022), Facebook (Kelly & Antonio, 2016) and Twitter (Rosenberg et al., 2016). These websites were already popular, but the COVID-19 pandemic caused a surge in traffic, with increases in some instances upwards of 20% (Marcin, 2020). Despite their popularity, comprehensive scoping research into the teacher-related content of these online marketplaces remains limited (Shelton et al., 2022; Shelton & Archambault, 2019). However, existing research has identified several issues with these marketplaces, including inaccurate content (Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014; Wessman-Enzinger & Hertel, 2017) and an overemphasis on the availability of visually

attractive ‘cute’ resources that lack substance (Gallagher et al., 2019; Grote-Garcia & Vasinda, 2014; Huber & Bates, 2016).

TPT was founded in 2006 by Paul Edelman, a former teacher in the NYC Public School District (Hodge et al., 2019). TPT is massive in scope. In 2017, there were 80,000 sellers hosted on TPT (Shelton & Archambault, 2019). According to Sawyer et al. (2020), in the spring of 2019, TPT reported over 5 million teacher users, 3 million available resources, and over 1 billion downloaded from their website. Also, they reported that two out of three teachers in the U.S. have used their platform at least once.

A budding area of research is beginning to illuminate TPT’s shortcomings. Some have described TPT as ‘the fast food of education’ (Bennett, 2019), suggesting that while the resources are attractive, they are often low-quality (Silver, 2022). Although teachers have stated the perceived benefits of TPT (Harris et al., 2023; Schroeder et al., 2019; Shelton & Archambault, 2018), research has shown that many materials on the platform do not align with CCSS (Polikoff & Dean, 2019). Studies have revealed that social studies resources on TPT often contain inaccurate narratives and flawed perspectives (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Furthermore, research has indicated that mathematics materials frequently consist of tasks with low cognitive demand (Hu et al., 2018).

As noted, TPT orients itself around efficiency, which scholars have identified as the primary appeal for teachers seeking curriculum materials for supplementation (Brown et al., 2023; Silver, 2022). TPT streamlines informational resources and choices available to buyers, aiming to expedite decision-making. As a result, TPT minimizes contextual seller details, accentuating positive reviews to emphasize quick and efficient purchases intended to save teachers time (Silver, 2021).

The time-saving orientation to TPT is at the crux of this present study. Our teaching team perceived TPT as a viable option due to its promise of quick and easy access to instructional materials. Faced with numerous job demands such as managing parent communication, managing IEP meeting paperwork, professional development requirements etc. we found ourselves lacking time to develop new materials from scratch, prompting us to turn to TPT. However, upon utilizing the materials obtained, it became evident that they did not meet our expectations for curriculum quality. This narrative case study aims to elucidate the underlying dynamics of our experience with TPT and its materials.

### **Complex Dynamic Systems Theory: Theoretical Framework**

The data collection and analysis in this study is framed by a complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) perspective. Schools are highly complex systems (Jacobson & Wilensky, 2006; Kasman et al., 2017; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Koopmans, 2020; McQuillan & Kershner, 2018; O'Day, 2002; Steenbeek & Van Geert, 2013). Therefore, we need ways to study those systems that reflect their complexity (Larsen-Freeman, 2016). A CDST approach is an interdisciplinary paradigm that examines how systems behave, how their components interact, and how stability, change, and unpredictable behavior manifest within those systems (Koopmans, 2020). Education systems (such as school districts), similar to healthcare networks, are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and constant change in a nonlinear fashion, which results in a landscape of ambiguity (Rowe & Courtney, 2016).

There is no universally accepted definition of a complex system; however, scholarly consensus acknowledges specific components within such systems (Paradisi et al., 2015). Generally, a complex system is conceptualized as multi-component, including individuals, subsystems, units, etc. These components engage through intricate interactions characterized by

unpredictability, forming a network of dynamic relationships (Paradisi et al., 2015). System components can take material or conceptual forms such as individual students, teachers, motivation, discourse, etc. (Bunge, 2000). System components interact over time and create emergent outcomes at higher levels of the system that cannot be predicted (Hilpert & Marchand, 2018).

As Koopmans (2020) contended, a complex dynamic system, as applied to education, can vary depending on the observer's perspective. However, researchers commonly delineate and bind their conceptualizations of these systems at several critical levels—specifically, the classroom, school, or school district level (Kaplan & Garner, 2020; Koopmans, 2020).

As mentioned, schools are multifaceted and complex, involving many agents that behave dynamically. For example, any *centralized* system (the school system, the school, the classroom) includes individual agents (schools, school admin, teachers, staff, etc.) making their own *decentralized* decisions within that system (Koopmans, 2020). Each level of the system is complex in its own right, and there is additional complexity in the interactions between their varying levels (Jacobson, 2020).

In a conceptualization of the classroom as a bounded system, a researcher might view the primary components of a classroom as the students, the teachers, the curriculum, and the physical environment. The system's unpredictability is increased by the unique prior knowledge, learning preferences, and social behaviors encompassing each student. Teachers play the role of facilitators, assisting students in learning. The physical environment influences the spatial dynamics of learning (distractions, conversations, room temperature, etc.), while curriculum materials supply the content foundation. These elements are constantly interacting, impacting,

and being influenced by one another in a complex dynamic process that is difficult to fully comprehend.

### **Self-Organization and Emergence**

Critical components of CDST are *emergence* and *self-organization*. DeWolf and Holvoet (2005) emphasized the importance of differentiating between these concepts, which are often conflated. Self-organization is how order emerges out of interactions between elements within the system (D. G. Green et al., 2010). Self-organization happens when systems organize themselves *without* external direction or control, and the organization is related to increased structure and order within the system (DeWolf and Holvoet, 2005). Yates (2001) defined self-organization as

A process in which pattern at the global level of a system emerges solely from numerous interactions among the lower-level components of the system. Moreover, the rules specifying interactions among the system's components are executed using only local information, without reference to the global pattern. (p. 8)

Self-organization can be conceptualized as human decision-making (Yukalov & Sornette, 2014). This phenomenon can manifest dynamically in a classroom, contingent on the specific context. For instance, it might become evident when teachers face an unexpected curriculum change midway through the school year. In such a situation, self-organization is demonstrated through the teachers' adaptation and improvisation. Here, the classroom functions as a system wherein teachers must engage in informal discussions, strategize, and seek out new curriculum materials until the official resources are available. Their collaborative efforts result in the creation of new lesson plans that direct their instruction. This process exemplifies self-organization because there was no external centralized direction (e.g., directives from the principal). The teachers

recognized an issue and innovated to solve it. As a result, the system (the classroom) can adapt and respond effectively to changes.

DeWolf and Holvoet (2005) stated that a system demonstrates emergence when macro-level features arise from interactions among micro-level components. Similarly, Goldstein (1999) defined emergence as the arising of properties during the self-organization process of complex systems. Goldstein added that emergent properties are conceptualized to happen at the macro-level of the system, as opposed to the micro-level components from which they arise. To identify emergence, the observer must be able to assume the existence of a hierarchical system (a bounded system) that can be observed, measured, and studied at both the macroscopic and microscopic levels (Gignoux et al., 2017).

In the scenario of teachers implementing a new supplemental curriculum, emergent behaviors quickly revealed the poor quality of the materials. Due to the inadequacies in the curriculum, teacher questioning was less effective, failing to deeply engage students or promote critical thinking. Students exhibited signs of confusion and disengagement. Teachers resorted to varied and ad-hoc strategies without a cohesive plan, leading to a fragmented and disjointed learning experience. These emerging patterns highlight the intricate relationship between classroom dynamics and curriculum quality, highlighting the vital necessity for strong and well-thought-out instructional materials to facilitate efficient teaching and learning.

### **Implications for the Classroom and Research**

Jacobson et al. (2019) emphasized the necessity of distinguishing the CDST approach from traditional qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. They argued that while conventional qualitative and quantitative methodologies have proven beneficial over many years, their primary efficacy lies in explaining phenomena that have already occurred.

Larsen-Freeman (2016) extended this critique by highlighting the limitations of conventional experimental research. She argued that traditional experiments, which rely on controlling contexts and situations, are incompatible with a CDST approach because conventional methods aim to control variables rather than investigate how systems adapt within varying contexts. In contrast, adaptability is a fundamental aspect of CDST, making traditional control-based experimental designs unsuitable for studying complex dynamic systems.

A methodology is needed that captures the inherent complexity of real-world practice, does not trivialize extraneous variables, and maintains context as a central element (Barab & Squire, 2004). For these reasons, Larsen-Freeman (2016) advocated for case study as a uniquely positioned research methodology that can inform us about the complexity of teaching.

### **Methodology**

The case explored in this study is the curriculum implementation process of our fifth-grade researcher-practitioner team when navigating an unexpected mid-year ELA curriculum change during the 2023-2024 academic school year at an elementary school in the Midwest. This study is qualitative in nature and examines the complexities and nuances of implementing curriculum and dealing with supplemental materials.

### **Purpose and Scope**

The principal purpose of this study is to illustrate a nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in teaching practices. This research is not concerned with generalizing the result. Instead, the focus is on delving deeply into the intricacies of a single case. In this context, I examine the curriculum implementation process involved in using supplemental curriculum materials from TPT. By doing so, the study gives voice to the diverse perspectives within the teaching profession and highlights the lived experience of teachers in the K-12 context. The

secondary purpose of this study is to contribute to the nascent literature that is beginning to index the consequences of using materials from TPT.

This case focuses on our teaching process while navigating the curriculum change. The process includes planning our instruction. The implementation of our instruction, along with the necessary refinements we made. And lastly, the assessment of our instruction. This process is bounded within the 2023-2024 academic school year. The participants include a focus group of five students, Jenn and me. Of salience is the understanding that the case is exploring our teaching process specifically, which cannot be separated from the classroom context or the students, highlighting the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning. This understanding is in accordance with Creswell (2002), who argued that a case study is the perfect approach to examine processes.

### **Case Study**

This is narrative descriptive case study. The justification for utilizing this methodology involves the compatibility of the CDST lens to view the classroom along with case study's ability to deeply understand a bounded system and study its process (Merriam, 1988). The narrative presentation helps portray the complexity of teaching choices and challenges I observed and experienced firsthand in the company of my partner teacher.

Research that takes a complexity perspective lends itself well to a case study as a qualitative methodology to garner data about classrooms (O'Leary, 2010). There is a notable similarity in the language used to describe complex systems and case studies. Smith (1978) articulated that the "what" is a bounded system. It can be a single entity or a unit with defined bounds. The researcher can "fence in" the unit of study, which allows for a clear delineation of

the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2013) defined case study in the following manner

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 97)

Creswell (2002) suggested using case study methodology when the research problem involves gaining a deep understanding of a specific “case” or bounded system. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring an event, activity, process, or individual(s).

Of salience is that case study has varying definitions and applications depending on the researcher (Gomm et al., 2009). In an examination of the definitions of case study, Thomas contended that differing themes, priorities, and epistemological starting points account for the various definitions attributed to case study, stating that researchers from sociology, education, and psychology tend to see case study through an interpretivist frame. In contrast, those from business and politics might reject the interpretivist frame in place of a neopositivist frame, which uses case study to find variables to be studied more ‘rigorously.’ Likewise, Thomas stated that those in medicine and law have a proclivity to only view case study as a method for illustrating novel phenomena. Thomas (2011) pointed to Simons (2009) to elucidate the commonalities between the different epistemological viewpoints. Simons concluded that the unifying factor is a commitment to studying the complexity of real-life situations.

Yin (1994) defined case study as ‘a detailed examination of a single entity or event (i.e., case) such as a person, group, place, or organization. Case studies are commonly used in social,

educational, clinical, and business research.’(p. 13) Stake (Stake, 1995) defined case study in this manner, A case study involves an in-depth investigation of a particular individual, group, or phenomenon. It typically involves gathering detailed information through various methods (e.g., interviews, observations, documents) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the case under study. Merriam (1988) defined case study as ‘An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. It involves multiple sources of evidence and aims to provide rich descriptions and explanations of the case.’ Merriam (1988) stated that qualitative case study can be defined as “An intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. Case studies are pluralistic, descriptive and heuristic and heavily rely on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources” (p. 16) The shared quality of these three definitions is in their focus on a thorough examination of the case with emphasis on real-life context and empirical inquiry.

Ferguson (2024) argued that case studies are necessarily bound in time and place; therefore, the implications of the cases are also context-bound. Ferguson further clarified that if the narrative purposely expands or constricts the boundaries of what is possible in a system, that process subsequently transfers to a participant’s sense of what is possible within that system. Similarly, Chaffee and Tierney (1988) stated that only through intimate contact with daily institutional life (such as life in a school), can we create multifaceted interpretations of that institution.

Gomm et al. (2009) highlighted that a central feature of case study is that it implies the collection of unstructured data for qualitative analysis. Gomm further argued that the primary goal of case study research should be to capture the unique aspects of individual cases, rather

than using them solely for broader generalizations or theoretical inferences. This perspective often suggests that a narrative approach, rather than one focused on variable analysis, is more suited to achieving this aim. Some researchers navigate this tension by explicitly stating their goals of generalizability. Alnamnakani (Alnamnakani, 2024), for instance, explicitly stated the goal of the study is *not* to generalize but instead to get an in-depth understanding of the nuances in a particular case. However, Højgaard and Sølberg (2023) delineated the scope of their generalizability in their study, stating it *only* had the generalizability to understand different processes at hand, so some marginal generalizability.

Rushton (2001) paired the powerful methodology of case study with narrative to illuminate teachers' experiences. As Rushton (2001) demonstrated, narratives have been used to delve into how teachers think (Craig, 1995; Craig, 1998), how students perceive teachers (Lincoln, 1995; Thomas & Montgomery, 1995), and how schools operate (Cortazzi, 1993). Many other researchers have used narrative inquiry in tandem with case study methodology to garner powerful insights into education (Anand & Bachmann, 2021; Ferguson, 2024; Højgaard & Sølberg, 2023)

Humans are inherently drawn to narratives as we navigate a world shaped by stories that instruct and inspire us (Bennett, 2019). As Reisman (2008) contended, 'story' and 'narrative' are often used interchangeably. Mattingly and Garro (1994) asserted that narratives help people share what happened in the past and enhance our understanding of the present and, potentially, our future. Similarly, Wood (2000) stated that narratives play a crucial role in helping us respond to real-world problems and in helping us consider more appropriate ways of responding to those problems. Wood (2000) also argued that narratives are particularly helpful for teachers because they can use narratives to gain insight into their practices and chart new directions for teacher

learning. This insight from Wood is especially pertinent as teaching has been described as a complex practice (Chang, 2009; Wubbels et al., 2006). Cochran-Smith (2003) added, “Teaching is unforgivingly complex. It is not simply good or bad, right or wrong, working or failing” (p.4). As Carter (1993) emphasized, educators can use narrative to capture the depth of their experiences and the complexity of understanding what teaching truly entails.

Doecke et al. (2000) noted that narrative is especially productive for teachers to convey the complexities of their classroom practice, citing its ability to enable teachers to organize experiences in relation to the complexities of teaching. Preskill (1998) suggested that these narratives serve as valuable guides through the challenges, pitfalls, and joys of educating students. Furthermore, Preskill argued that narratives reaffirm the pivotal role that teachers play in humanizing students, which can unleash their ability to make a difference in our world.

Chambers and Godzich (1984) described a narrative as “someone telling someone else that something happened” (p. 4). Shotter and Parker (1990) portrayed narrative as a verbal recounting of life events. Building upon these definitions with more specificity, Polkinghorne (1995) connected narrative to research and added that narrative is “a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action” (p.5). Polkinghorne further elaborated that the term narrative has been employed by qualitative researchers in various ways and contends that in the context of narrative inquiry, *narrative* refers to a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal story by means of a plot.

Grumet (1990) suggested that a story encompasses three dynamic parts. The first part is ‘situation,’ which recognizes storytelling as an event intertwined with specific social, cultural, and political dynamics. The second part is ‘narrative,’ highlighting the specificity, presence, and expressive power conveyed through symbolic and semiotic aspects of language. Lastly, the third

component of this triad is ‘interpretation,’ which offers readers the opportunity to engage with the story by adding their own voice to the conversation as audience members. This engagement allows them to question, agree with, or reject aspects of the narrative.

In the early 1980s’ narrative gained currency within the social sciences as a distinct form of research inquiry (Butt, 1984; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Eisner, 1991; Goodson & Walker, 1991; Grumet, 1999). As Weber (1993) detailed, narrative became popular as a form of research that used *the particular* to understand *the general*, but also relies on the general to illuminate the particular.

Pairing narrative inquiry and case study makes for a powerful methodology. These approaches allow researchers to delve deeply into the lived experiences, perspectives, and complexities of individuals and communities within specific contexts. By employing narrative inquiry, researchers can capture the dynamic interplay between personal narratives and broader socio-cultural influences, shedding light on diverse perspectives and identities. Likewise, case study methodologies provide a holistic lens to examine real-life phenomena, offering a detailed examination of specific cases within their natural settings. Through in-depth exploration and analysis, case studies facilitate a nuanced understanding of complex issues, contributing to theory-building and practical insights.

### **Case Study Approach**

To answer the research questions, I used a descriptive case study approach. Yin (2003) submitted three types of case studies – descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory. Exploratory case studies should be used to investigate phenomena where little prior knowledge of the topic exists (Yin, 2003). This type of case study aids in understanding the context of a situation. It is typically employed when a researcher wants to assess the feasibility of conducting a more

comprehensive study in the future (Sheppard, 2020). Researchers should use explanatory case study to explain cause-and-effect relationships (Sheppard, 2020). This type of research provides insights into the relationships between variables and the causal links in real-life interventions that encompass the phenomenon (Yin, 2003). As such, an explanatory case study helps explain how some situations came to be or why events occurred or did not occur (Salamons, 2023).

Descriptive narrative case study is appropriate when the goal is to describe an intervention or phenomenon within its real-life context (Salamons, 2023). Descriptive case studies are narrative-driven and focus on illuminating the specific features of a case without dissecting causality (Yin, 2003).

My decision to choose a descriptive narrative case study is justified through a complexity perspective. CDTS posits that education settings are characterized by constant change, non-linearity, self-organization, emergence, adaption, etc. (Mital et al., 2014). In line with this perspective, a descriptive case study allows for a narrative-driven exploration of adaption, self-organization, and emergence in a real-life context. Under the descriptive case study approach, the research provides a holistic understanding of the complexity inherent within the case, uncovering valuable insights into the nature of teaching.

### **Context and Setting**

The classroom is led by Jenn (pseudonym), a 5th-grade teacher in her fourth year of experience. In the classroom, I acted as a researcher-practitioner following Jenn's lead. I helped with day-to-day classroom duties and responsibilities. I helped plan instruction, implement instruction, and assess learning. Refer back to the Contextual Setting section at the beginning of this manuscript for a more detailed outlook on the setting.

## Methods

The data collection component of this study required methods that recognized the teaching *and* its complexity. To garner contextually sensitive, real-time data that effectively follow the teaching process, I employed a design-based research (DBR) framework. Because DBR uses a complexity lens and involves iterative design cycles of teaching<sup>7</sup>, assessing, and reflecting, it inherently aligns with my theoretical framework while providing an effective process to guide my teaching. While DBR principles guided the data collection, the data analysis and data presentation still followed a narrative case study approach.

### Design Based Research

Anderson and Shattuck (2012) asserted that DBR was created by educators for educators. At its inception, DBR was crafted as academics realized that educational research had failed to improve classroom practices and was conducted in sterile, laboratory-like conditions that did not reflect the true dynamic nature of classrooms (Armstrong et al., 2002). Anderson (2005) defines DBR in the following manner.

Design-based research is method developed for conducting educational research that focuses on systematic and multifaceted development and evaluation of interventions in operating educational contexts. It shares the naturalistic research imperative to study interventions in the context of actual use as opposed to research conducted in laboratory settings. Like action research, design-based research entails work on a practical problem identified by practicing professionals. Design-based research involves a partnership between educational practitioners and trained researchers. (p. 3)

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<sup>7</sup> Iterative design cycles involve a typical teaching process where instruction is designed, implemented, evaluated and refined based on real-world feedback. This process affords the teacher the ability to adapt to the needs of their environment (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).

A central feature of DBR is that it recognizes the messiness that characterizes real-world practice and does not trivialize extraneous variables, always keeping them in context (Barab & Squire, 2004). Teaching is unforgivingly complex; There is no accurate way to assume all the possibilities in a given day, and DBR allows researchers to account for these variables (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

DBR has a goal that seeks to increase the impact of teaching practice and views the researcher as an additive component to the classroom, utilizing a researcher-practitioner team approach. It has been posited against the more commonly known action research, which places the burden of the study on busy practitioners, whereas DBR puts the brunt of the research on the researcher (Anderson, 2005; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). DBR scholars have commented on the agile nature of the methodology, which offers a strategy for detailed design, exploration, enactment, evaluation, and redesign of teaching (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). DBR uses relationships among research, research design, and practice to manifest scientific values through the active, continual involvement of the researchers in learning and teaching procedures (Wang & Hannafin, 2005).

## **Participants**

### ***Jenn***

Jenn was a fourth-year teacher who had been working at the same school since finishing her teacher preparation program. She taught third grade for one year before transitioning to fifth-grade, where she has remained since. Jenn identifies as a white woman who speaks English as a first language and German as an additional language. Jenn completed a highly-ranked traditional teacher preparation program and regularly participated in her school's mandatory professional development initiatives.

### ***The Researcher (Me)***

My experience spans a multitude of roles, including classroom assistant, substitute teacher, classroom teacher, school administrator, instructional coach, and manager of various curriculum departments. I have taught pre-service and in-service teachers, and I have international experience in some of these roles. In the U.S., all my experience is situated in inner-city schools, most of which are Title I schools, serving students categorized as low socioeconomic status (SES).

### ***Focus Students***

While this fifth-grade class consisted of 26 students in total, the focus group only comprised five of them, which this research centers on. The preferred language of communication among this group was English, but all five students spoke a different language at home, including: Spanish, Pashto, Karen, Hmong, and English. Having worked with multilingual learners for over a decade, my observations showed that all students appeared comfortable communicating in English and to the untrained ear, one may not even realize that these students speak another language. I categorize all of these students as ‘eager to learn.’ They came to our lesson everyday ready to take on the task I gave them. They all asked questions and generally appeared happy to be working with me. At one point, students reminded me that I forgot to give them homework over a long weekend.

Language was not a deciding factor in the selection of the students. Jenn and I gave an assessment and used that data to categorize students for our small group instruction. In analyzing the data, Jenn and I sorted the student work into three different piles with the informal descriptors, “met expectations, almost met expectations, and in needs significant support.” Within the needs significant support group, Jenn identified a trend where five students had

similar overall scores on the assessment and missed identical questions. These five students formed the focus group toward which I directed my instruction in a small-group setting.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection framework is directly drawn from Bradley and Reinking (2008), as they provide a palatable guide for constructing methods under a DBR lens. There were six phases to this DBR study, all suggested by Bradley and Reinking (2008). The six phases of this DBR study afford a robust structure for conducting data collection while aligning seamlessly with the case study approach. More importantly, this integrated approach respects and maintains the classroom and the school's goals of delivering high-quality instruction in a supportive setting.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study follows an interpretive and analytical approach and follows a six-phase design based on Bradley and Reinking's (2008) principles of DBR methods. Their framework also corresponds with the principles of data analysis for a case study approach (Yin, 1994, 2003, 2009) in that both frameworks recognize the value of context-driven analyzation of a bounded system. The data from this study were drawn from multiple sources, including teacher observations, teacher team conversations and student produced work. The methodological choice for data collection supports the study's CDST theoretical framework, which recognizes real-life context and complexity that case study also aims to portray. In this manner, the data analysis, theoretical framework, and methodology are all in alignment.

### ***Thematic Coding***

The data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns and themes across the phases of implementation and adaptation. Key themes included the quality and usability of the TPT materials, the practical challenges of adapting them to the classroom context, and their

impact on both teaching and learning processes. These themes were iteratively refined to ensure that they accurately captured the nuances of the participants' experiences and the complexities of the classroom setting.

### ***Phase-Based Approach***

The focus of this manuscript is on our teaching team. As such, the findings in this research begin at the formulation of our relationship, which required careful attention and scrutiny on my part due to all the different factors that contributed to ensuring this work could be carried out in an effective manner. As noted, the findings are organized according to the progressive phases highlighted by Bradley and Reinking (2008), this also mirrors the phases of curriculum implementation and adaptation that occurred in the classroom. Each phase elucidates the challenges and outcomes associated with using the TPT materials, which acts as a thorough examination of their impact on both the teaching process and student learning process. By following a phased approach, the findings chronologically reveal the practical realities of managing a curriculum change while relying on digitally sourced supplementary resources.

### **Contextual Narrative Continued (Findings)**

This section presents the findings from this study which are organized around the research questions: (1) How does a teaching team navigate changing ELA curricula, midyear, drawing on curriculum materials from Teachers Pay Teachers? and (2) How do students respond to a midyear ELA curriculum change that uses curriculum materials from Teachers Pay Teachers? This section is presented as a continuation of the contextual narrative section at the precipice of this article.

## **Phase 1 - Forming a Research Partnership (My Role)**

The initiation of relationships is a crucial element of a case study approach; this underscores the importance of understanding the context of the bounded system (Creswell, 2002; Yin, 2003). As noted in the contextual setting section of this manuscript, the relationship began during the 2022-2023 school year. Upon our introduction, Jenn and I talked about the basics of what DBR is and what it attempts to accomplish. Jenn shared that she was interested in the idea that she could have another adult in the classroom with her and liked that I have been a teacher for a long time and could give her suggestions when necessary. We talked a considerable amount about my role in the classroom, and I made clear that I view myself as a classroom assistant with more expertise than the conventional. Our partnership should be symbiotic in that we would work together to achieve a common goal (improving student learning). I would follow her lead in lesson planning, classroom instruction, and assessment, and I should be able to give my opinion on these entities when/if necessary. A partnership (as opposed to a top-down hierarchy) was what I envisioned while retaining some autonomy to make in-the-moment instructional decisions based on my discretion while still following Jenn's daily lead. Our collaboration allowed for rich, contextually grounded insights into teaching practices and student interactions, aligning with Merriam's (1998) emphasis on case studies to explore in-depth, complex, real-life situations.

Jenn and I also discussed providing feedback about her instruction. I had to tread lightly here because I did not want to position myself as an authority figure. I shared that I would *only* be comfortable doing so if she was interested. She saw this as one of the most intriguing factors of the study. In this sense, it was necessary to consider my role here as it could have been easy for Jenn to give way to my opinions and views simply because I have been a teacher for a long

time. Here, I drew from Ratcliffe (1999), who employed a strategy called ‘rhetorical listening,’ which places value on listening to facilitate cross-cultural dialogues about any topic. In her work, Ratcliffe (1999) positioned listening against reading, writing, and speaking and argues that listening has been drastically ignored as a rhetorical strategy, resulting in the loss of ability to hear discursive tropes among groups. Ratcliffe’s aim was not to conceptualize a totalizing definition of listening, as this proves impossible. Rather, her goal was to restore the value of the benefits it can provide researchers. Ratcliffe’s work allowed me to make a conscious effort to ensure that I was an active listener throughout this process. While this might not be a formal framework I employed to record data, I think Ratcliffe’s offerings improved my relationship with Jenn.

During the 2023-2024 school year, the relationship grew. The first way the relationship has grown is that we undoubtedly have more trust. Last year, I felt like a researcher going into the classroom. This school year, I feel like I am just an ordinary teacher who is a part of the classroom. Because I started this school year in August with this class, I feel like I am a part of the ecosystem rather than inserting myself into it after it has already been solidified.

With any new professional relationship, there is a period during which the group learns about each other—their tendencies, preferences, viewpoints, etc. This school year, Jenn and I already had an understanding of those dynamics, which made our time working together easier. It felt like we were refining our partnership instead of learning how to form it. Something also notable is that there was a point when I took over the class full-time due to some health complications that Jenn had. Because of that, there were times when I was the teacher in the classroom, and Jenn was not there, sometimes for over a week straight.

Another way our relationship has changed compared to last school year is that I do not play as much of a mentor role with her. In my first year working with her, there was a significant focus on highlighting areas where she could improve her instruction. Because of this, our relationship sometimes naturally felt like I was her advisor or mentor. This year, I feel our relationship is more reciprocal and mutual. I think this change is because her instruction has improved immensely throughout our time working together, so we do not have as many conversations about it.

## **Phase 2: Collecting Information to Understand the Context**

Understanding the classroom context is a foundational component of case study research, which attempts to understand the nuances of the real-life bounded system (Yin, 2003). Bradley and Reinking (2008) suggested that in this phase, the researcher meets with the teacher to collect information about the classroom. This suggestion assumes the researcher enters the classroom as an outside entity. I did not conduct this portion of the study as I felt it was unnecessary. Although I did not conduct a formal interview with Jenn during this part of the research, I started working in this classroom on the first day of school and felt my prolonged tenure in the room accurately afforded me the context of the bounded system. Additionally, I helped conduct routine beginning-of-school-year diagnostic assessments with Jenn, which gave me a baseline understanding of student abilities.

Furthermore, due to my fewer responsibilities in the room, I may have more context for student lives than Jenn. I feel this way because I have time to chat with students during different parts of the day that Jenn does not have. For example, if a student is having a tough time during the day, I would sometimes take them for a walk around the school, and we would talk about

home life or any other issues the student might be having. Because Jenn is the teacher of record in the room, she does not have this freedom.

As an anecdote and example of the contextual understanding of the classroom, there was a day when one of our students was having a particularly difficult time. The student was very emotional and had about three different outbursts in a matter of two hours. Noticing that the student was having a difficult time, I asked him if he wanted to take a walk with me around the school to get some fresh air and cool off, and he agreed.

While on our walk, he shared that he had a challenging time at home the night before and did not get much sleep. At the time, he thought that his parents would get a divorce because he overheard a disagreement about their rent payment. Through our conversation, I explained to him that being an adult can sometimes be stressful due to the many responsibilities and that disputes of this nature can be routine and should not be a cause for concern. Through the conversation, I learned that the student unjustly inferred that the parents would divorce based on one disagreement about the rent, and there was no need for concern at that point.

The student expressed that feelings of anxiousness and worry subsided after our conversation, and the outbursts had stopped. I kept a mental record that the student could have a proclivity to get anxious, which could lead to outbursts, affecting the learning environment for other students. Learning who the student was and understanding the thinking style this student portrayed is an example of my sense-making process to understand the context of the classroom. Because I understand and know this individual student better, I facilitated classroom management better, which affects student learning, ultimately affecting the bounded system.

## ***The Old Curriculum***

From August to mid-December, our classroom used the Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts curriculum (henceforth CKLA) for ELA instruction. The data collection commenced after we stopped using this curriculum, as such, I will provide a cursory explanation of CKLA. According to CKLA's website it stands as the premier early literacy curriculum rooted in the science of reading principles. It integrates knowledge-building with research-based foundational skills, offering educators the tools to cultivate proficient readers, writers, and thinkers. Featuring a robust online platform alongside a complementary Spanish language arts curriculum, Amplify CKLA delivers an all-encompassing solution tailored for PreK–5 educators and their students (*Amplify CKLA*, n.d.). Jenn and I were both indifferent towards CLKA. We felt that it did have some good qualities, but it also lacked some. The data collection for this study began *after* we stopped using CKLA. Consequently, the curriculum is not directly part of this study.

I would like to draw attention back to the contextual narrative at the beginning of this manuscript. The narrative is pivotal in understanding the context of the curriculum change. We were completely unaware this change was in order. We had no say in whether we wanted to change the curriculum. It was unclear when we would get the new curriculum, and we did not know how soon we would need to implement it upon receiving it. Something to note is that this decision was made at the district level, so there was not much school-level oversight that the principal and the curriculum coordinator could provide.

When we received notice of the curriculum change, we had about two week's worth of CKLA material left to teach. Jenn and I recalled a brief conversation we had about two weeks prior. In passing, she noted that the new shipment of CKLA materials had not come in and

should have been there by now. At the time, neither of us knew that conversation would foreshadow future events.

With about three days' worth of CKLA material left, we received a pilot unit for the new curriculum. While teaching the rest of CKLA, we tried to get an understanding of the new curriculum and its materials. We reviewed some CKLA content that we thought students would benefit from. This also gave Jenn and I more time to understand the new curriculum. At this point, we felt that while this was massively inconvenient, we could manage.

### ***The New Curriculum***

The new curriculum and the curriculum used for this study is EL Education (Formerly Expeditionary Learning). Moving forward, the curriculum will be referred to as 'EL.' According to EL's 2022 impact report, 1.1 million students are using the curriculum nationally, which accounts for at least one school district in 48 states and Washington DC. In 2022, students in schools that used the EL curriculum outperformed their school district and state peers in ELA and math, while EL high schools benefited from a 94% graduation rate. EL also claims a positive statistically significant two-year impact when its curriculum is used, equating to about 1.4 months of additional growth in student achievement compared to control groups.

Our early implementation of EL was relatively standard. We unpacked individual lessons and units in our sense-making process of learning how to use it. We made a plan delineating what to focus on during lessons and how to use the assessments. Over the course of two weeks, we made many mistakes but began to streamline the process of our curriculum use. Jenn and I reported the same feeling with CKLA – we were indifferent toward the curriculum. It had some shortcomings, but it also had some advantages. We moved through the pilot unit at the suggested pace. However, there was a glaring problem. We only had *one* pilot unit that we could use to

teach and were unaware of when the materials that contained the new unit would arrive. The remainder of this methods section details our experience, beginning with the end-of-unit assessment at the end of the pilot unit and then using the new supplementary materials from TPT.

### **Phase 3: Gather Baseline Data Prior to Intervention**

Gathering baseline data is essential to understand the initial conditions of the case. As part of an end-of-unit assessment, we administered a test to students that assesses their comprehension of *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. This assessment gauged knowledge of the story in relation to the following Common Core State Standards: RL.5.1, RI.5.1, W.5.9a, SL.5.1, SL.5.1a, SL.5.1b, SL.5.1c. Upon sifting through the data, Jenn and I ascertained which standards of focus would be the highest leverage. This means that we aimed to find standards that had multiple discreet skills within a single standard. For example, RL.5.1 states, “Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.” This is three discreet skills. First students must know how to quote, then explain the quote and lastly student must draw their own inferences. We specifically focused on RL.5.1 and RI.5.1, as these standards accounted for the areas where students needed the most review.

In analyzing the data, Jenn and I sorted the student work into three different piles with the informal descriptors, “met expectations, almost met expectations, and in needs significant support.” Within the needs significant support group, Jenn identified a trend where five students had similar overall scores on the assessment and missed identical questions. These five students formed the focus group toward which I directed my instruction in a small-group setting. While

all the students in the classroom received targeted small-group instruction for review purposes, this case study reflects the experiences working with the five students in the focus group.

To clarify, we finished the CKLA material in mid-December and taught the new EL curriculum until early February, when we exhausted the materials. Due to the curriculum change, continuing with the same EL curriculum materials we had just used was impractical. From reading the EL curriculum materials documents, we were supposed to be provided with material for end-of-unit review purposes. However, we were not provided with such material. At this point, we sought material from TPT.

During our planning discussions, using TPT appeared to be the practical solution, as we needed material to target the RL.5.1 and RI.5.1 standards. Jenn and I used the platform in the past for small supplementary purposes. Jenn's experience with the platform involved finding and using fun holiday activity worksheets such as crossword puzzles, color-in-the-blank, and word searches. My experience was more extensive. In looking through my TPT account, I have downloaded six free materials for the classrooms that I have taught in the past. Of those six resources, two are multiplication charts, and the other four are math center games, which I do not remember ever using. I have paid for five resources from TPT, including common core-aligned flashcards (two sets), a vocabulary word wall set, and two separate "digital notebooks" that I purchased during the COVID-19 pandemic and do not remember using. Despite our familiarity with TPT, we had never relied on it as the sole source of curriculum.

Due to Jenn's responsibilities of running the classroom, I was tasked with searching for and finding the materials. During our discussions, we both agreed that I would be responsible for choosing which materials we would use. The search was straightforward: I entered the grade level, filtered by the subject and specific standard. Within seconds, I found many resources

targeting RL.5.1 and RI.5.1. The platform allows you to preview the curriculum. The time-saving allure of TPT had seemingly been realized at that moment. Still, the platform limits how much can be seen. Because of this limitation, I used the comments and reviews to gauge which option I would choose. My choice felt like an educated guess, but honestly, it felt like a bit of a gamble. I was not entirely sure I was making the correct choice.

This experience highlights the iterative and adaptive nature of the teaching process, which case study research aims to capture. As Yin (2014) underscores, the ongoing data collection and analysis informs the next steps of the research process. The difficulties in selecting materials from TPT highlight the real-world complexities that case study methodology is uniquely positioned to document (Stake, 1995). In this phase of the research, our actions were guided by the unexpected immediate needs of the classroom, which exemplifies the affordances of the methodology (Case Study), the theoretical framework (CDST), and the methods (DBR) to work together to capture the complexity and nuances of teaching.

### ***Description of TPT Material***

I will not disclose information about the TPT seller who published the materials to ensure anonymity. However, I purchased two separate materials from two different sellers, totaling \$11. One of the resources targeted RL.5.1, and the other resource targeted RI.5.1. Each resource came with student readings, graphic organizers, anchor charts, assessments, and a teacher pacing guide. The robust set of offerings was the drawing feature of the curriculum. While there was no specification, I speculated each resource was about three weeks' worth of material. I assumed we would get the new EL curriculum unit within a few days and did not anticipate using all the TPT materials. Upon instruction, we noticed some inconsistencies with the materials, which started the initial formulation of the potential research question.

## **Phase 4 and 5– Implementing and Refining the Intervention through Design Cycles**

Bradley and Reinking (2008) identified phase four, where the researcher-practitioner team implements intervention cycles, and subsequent phase five, where the team refines those design cycles. Notably, I could not distinguish between those two processes as I constantly refine my instruction before, during, and after implementation. As such, while implementing instruction and refining instruction might be two discrete skill sets, I present them as one process. The iterative and cyclical nature of the design cycles gives a detailed understanding of the educational setting, which also aligns with the case study approach. By documenting the cycles, the case study captures the teaching process's dynamic, evolving, and complex nature.

I borrowed from Gravemeijer and Cobb (2006) as a practical guide to documenting the design iterations. I implemented their suggestions for cyclical micro and macro design cycles to conceptualize my instruction. This process consisted of daily micro-cycles of instructional moves where I continually reflected on my practice and debriefed. This process informed the next cycle of teaching. I took advantage of daily journaling, documenting the day's lessons.

The longer-term macro-cycles represent findings that are made across the duration of the whole study. Bradley and Reinking (2008) argued that these cycles aim to find emergent frameworks to understand intervention. As with other methodologies, there is no agreed-upon “adequate time” for collecting data. Instead, enough time to understand the classroom ecology should be considered.

I speculated that implementing effective formative instruction that gives feedback at two consideration points is necessary in this step of the process. The formative assessments should provide Jenn and me with an indication of how effective our teaching was and give the students an idea of how closely they met the lesson objectives. The way to get this type of feedback is to

ensure that the formative assessments are measurable. In that, there is clear documentation of performance based on specified indicators.

#### **Phase Four and Five in Practice (Data Analysis)**

The challenges associated with using the TPT materials became apparent in phases four and five. At the outset of my planning, I used the suggestions in the teacher guide to understand how the author envisioned the implementation of the materials. Jenn and I decided the suggestions would provide a solid baseline of understanding. Still, they did not fully align with our local context, so we altered the curriculum by omitting some suggested material because students already had a good understanding. During this portion of our planning, Jenn and I had differing ideas about whether to omit some of the suggested materials. My perspective was that we should follow the TPT materials closely in the name of time. Jenn's perspective was that we should continue to alter the TPT materials to fit our local context. My view was that I did not think we should need to alter something that was already supplementary. In hindsight, Jenn's instincts were well-grounded and sound. We decided to follow her ideas that we should still alter the curriculum. We then mapped out a general scope and sequence to teach RL.5.1, and then RI.5.1. This adaptation in the teaching process underscores the iterative and reflexive nature of our teaching practice, reflecting the principles of DBR as outlined by Bradley and Reinking (2008).

The standard for RL.5.1 reads, "Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text." Consequently, the learning objective for this standard was "I can make inferences while quoting information explicitly stated in the text." During the implementation and refining phase, three significant issues

emerged that required considerable effort to manage. The problems represent a significant inconsistency in the quality of instructional materials.

### ***Activity One – Inference Puzzles***

The first significant issue was managing the “Inference Puzzles.” Inferencing is the act of activating schema (information that students already know about the topic) and cross-referencing schema with explicit details from the text to form conclusions (inferences) about the story. Of importance is that the inferences that students draw cannot be explicitly stated in the text. They must infer information using their own knowledge.

The curriculum provided “Inference Puzzles” for students to document their inferences. In this example, we used the inference puzzle for *Esperanza Rising* – The book that the whole class was reading. The TPT materials provided worksheets that contained corresponding puzzle pieces that matched up with other pieces. Generally, the students were asked to write a part of the story on one puzzle piece and write the inference they drew from that part of the story on another puzzle piece. There were four steps in total. Step one asked the teacher to display an anchor chart and discuss inference statements with the students. The teacher could either make a sample anchor chart or project/print the digital version. In Step two, the teacher was asked to model how to create an inference statement by making an inference puzzle using one of the provided story passages. If the students needed additional guidance, the teacher could print the pieces with answers on them for students to match the quotes with the explanations and inferences. In Step three, students should complete the remaining inference puzzles with a partner, using the designated reading passages. Finally, Step four required students to read a book independently and create the inference puzzle graphic organizer.

I followed the directions fully. Upon using the provided worksheet, I noticed the students thought they should be writing above the puzzle pieces and not inside of them. I am unsure why they decided to do this, but I feel it was a pattern, as three of the five students did this. Of note, they sat independently while completing this worksheet. I asked students to cross out and erase the information they had above the puzzle and put it inside the puzzle.

Another notable issue is the absence of headings on this document, which caused problems because the inference students should make goes into the largest puzzle piece. The explicit text evidence and background knowledge should be placed in the smaller puzzle pieces. I asked the students to label T.E. for text evidence and B.K. for background knowledge. However, the puzzle appeared to be upside down compared to the directions. These issues contributed to an overall unpleasant experience for the students and me. When implementing this lesson, Jenn and I thought this was merely a minor inconvenience and did not think this issue represented the overall quality of the whole curriculum.

### ***Activity Two – Walks For Wheels***

Another instance of consistency of quality stemmed from the wording of some of the questions. This presented a practical issue because students shared that they did not understand the question. Upon reviewing the question, I also found them confusing. The question stated, “Based on the passage, what can we infer about Hannah? Underline evidence in the passage to support each statement you check in red.” Below the question, there were four check boxes with a statement near each box. The statements contained general information about Hannah (the main character) that may or may not be true. All the students completed this question differently. Some of them put a check in the box, for the answers they thought were correct, some students colored the box and some students underlined the statements they thought were correct.

However, something they all had in common was that they did not understand what the question was asking them to do. I also did not understand what the question was asking them to do. All five of the students asked for clarification on this particular question. Because this was an assessment at the end of one of the mini-cycles, I refrained from helping the students figure out the answer. My typical response is something like, “Just try your best.” Some recorded questions that students asked me are as follows:

- “Am I supposed to put check marks?”
- “What am I supposed to be underlining?”
- “Do I put a checkmark when I finish reading that part in the story?”

The reason I have a propensity not to help students is because I want to get accurate data. When I do not help students, I get more accurate data. If I help students too much, that necessarily clouds the ability to judge if students are meeting the lesson's objectives. At this point in my instruction, I figured that this confusing question was a simple oversight, but I was beginning to wonder if a pattern was forming.

### **Activity Three – Underlined Section**

Another example from this same worksheet is question 4. The question asks students about “the underlined section.” But it does not make a reference to which underlined section. This ambiguity was problematic because there was a pre-underlined paragraph in the text. But also, question two asks students to underline. Still, after intense scrutiny, I am still unsure which underlined section the question referred to. An example of the question, followed by the text, can be found below.

#### **Activity Four – Screeching Sound**

This curriculum was riddled with similar mistakes. For brevity, I will not provide an account of all the errors. In this activity, the directions stated, “What was the sound that Jen heard? Underline evidence that supports your answer in orange.” I am not entirely sure what the author of the curriculum was asking. It appears that students should infer *what* the sound was. The text read, “She had been awakened by a screeching, deafening sound. A sound that meant no good.” No linking information explicitly details what the sound is. As an adult, I can infer that the sound was indeed the firetruck. However, descriptions of the firetruck itself are in the last paragraph. The text mentions the screeching sound in the first sentence. This question was different in that no students asked what to do. All the students underlined “screeching, deafening sound.” However, this may technically be incorrect. Again, this contributes to the overall difficulty in using this curriculum. Ultimately, I believe it caused more problems than it helped.

The difficulties encountered in selecting and implementing high-quality curriculum materials emphasize the need for careful consideration when choosing supplementary materials. Despite our best efforts to select appropriate resources, it became apparent that even with careful consideration, the choice was still somewhat of a gamble. While some teachers make money on TPT, Teachers often spend their own money on TPT, which raises an ethical issue. Although it is outside the scope of this manuscript, there is extensive literature highlighting the underpayment of teachers. From this experience, I have learned that teachers are essentially gambling with their money when they use TPT, risking the purchase of poor materials.

#### **Phase 6: Consolidating Data and Refining Theory**

Bradley and Reinking (2001) articulated phase 6, which requires a retrospective analysis where the researcher-practitioner team analyzes the data that has been collected and attempts to

notice emergent patterns across the design cycles and data sources. This phase exactly mirrors what teachers do with assessment data. Due to classroom dynamics where Jenn was busy with her work as a teacher, I was the only person who analyzed the data. The decision for myself to be the only person to analyze the data was deliberate. I think this decision reflects the reciprocal nature of DBR. While I do not want to reduce DBR to a transactional relationship between researcher and practitioner, it should not be ignored that a major benefit of me being in the classroom is *so* I can take some of the burden off of Jenn. In fact, my ability to just be a general helper in the room is one of the main reasons she agreed to participate in the research. While we did not analyze the data together, I did keep Jenn abreast with my thinking and shared that along the way. At its inception, DBR was created as researchers realized that educational research failed to improve classroom practices and was being conducted in sterile, laboratory-like conditions that did not reflect the true dynamic nature of classrooms (Armstrong et al., 2002). My ability to take some of the burden off Jenn speaks to the symbiotic nature of DBR that Anderson (2005) highlights as a drawing feature.

As a consequence of working with students in the small groups, two clear findings emerged: (1) All students found the questioning and layout of the curriculum materials confusing. Throughout our time using this curriculum, there were many instances where students felt confused and, in one example, a bit frustrated. (2) The many mistakes throughout the curriculum created a practical challenge that negatively affected my teaching. I began to lose trust in the curriculum materials, causing me to question if it was an ethical concern to continue implementing this curriculum. I felt that it was actually an ethical concern, and I stopped using this curriculum due to this fear. Ultimately, I created materials from scratch because I thought that was the only way to ensure high-quality materials were introduced to the students. In the end, TPT is presented

as a time-saving platform; However, for our teaching team, it added responsibilities to our workload.

The analysis of data from this study indicates that TPT's overall quality of materials can be poor. This affected both the teaching and learning process. By reflecting on the impact of these curriculum materials, these experiences can help to understand the broader implications of using TPT that have implications to the teaching and learning process.

### **Partnership Reflection**

Overall, working with Jenn for two consecutive school years was an experience that can be characterized by teamwork to ensure that the students received their necessary instruction. Even when Jenn and I disagreed on an issue, we were still able to collaborate to ensure we were meeting our goals. For me, there is one focal benefit that I received from our partnership. It was a reminder that all of the knowledge that I have about teaching practice took time to acquire. Working with Jenn gave me a chance to watch another practitioner learn things that I had learned over a decade ago. It was a reminder to have compassion and understanding for the teachers that I will work with over the years to come. It was also a reminder to have compassion and understanding for myself as I continue to make mistakes and learn from them. A decade from now, I am sure I look back at the current version of myself in the same way that I view the less-experienced version of myself a decade ago. And for me insight of this nature is priceless.

## **Discussion**

### **The Teaching Process**

When I purchased the materials from TPT, I felt relieved that I had found “usable” content in such a short amount of time. To be fair, the curriculum did provide the necessary components for effective teaching, such as student readings, graphic organizers, anchor charts,

assessments, and a teacher pacing guide. The components provided enough for me to feel I had all the necessary tools to target instruction at the standards.

The search process itself took about five minutes to feel that I had a good idea of the range of offerings on the platform. I found three options to show Jenn. She and I spent about ten minutes looking at the options and then decided on one. In all, finding a curriculum to teach took 15-20 minutes. From my view, this is a minimal amount of time to solve a catastrophic problem of not having any material to teach. At this point in the process, I was genuinely relieved.

However, the poor quality became evident as I used the materials more extensively. The relief I felt at the beginning of the process turned into grief and disappointment as I realized my students were not getting the high-quality curriculum they deserved. Although I gave myself grace, I felt a sense of guilt over this issue. While I do not think it is realistic for me to catch every mistake within a curriculum, I did feel a bit of responsibility in introducing this to the students. In this sense, my experience acts as a cautionary tale to other educators who might be lured into using TPT as the sole source of curriculum. This study speaks to the nuances of teaching at the implementation, adaption and supplementation levels.

### ***Curriculum Implementation***

At the implementation level, curriculum materials are designed to guide instruction, often under the assumption that they will be followed precisely by teachers. However, this “remote control” approach (Dow, 1991; Welch, 1979), where curriculum developers attempt to limit teacher discretion, can overlook the unique needs of the specific local context. In this study, the TPT materials were initially adopted as a time-saving solution, not an officially sanctioned curriculum. Still, the fact that the materials were sub-par reveals the issue with teachers

implementing curriculum with fidelity. It can severely overlook the students' specific needs, adversely affecting their learning experience.

A second issue regarding the implementation of the curriculum revolves around the perspective that teachers should be flexible and have the ability to adapt the materials as they see fit (Davis, 2006; Zeibarth et al., 2012). This flexible perspective assumes the teacher has the requisite skills for such an endeavor. While I have been teaching for over a decade and have garnered these mandatory skills, teachers who are new to the profession might not, and at that point, the students might never receive instruction that is adequate for their developmental levels.

### ***Curriculum Adaption and Supplementation***

The implications of this study on curriculum adaptation and supplementation often overlap. Teachers must frequently modify curriculum materials to better align with their specific classroom contexts or compensate for missing or low-quality components (Beyer & Davis, 2012; Tomlinson, 2011). This study exemplifies these practices, as we found ourselves extensively modifying the TPT materials to address challenges. Despite initially hoping these resources would save time, they required significant adaptation to meet our student needs. This mirrors existing research that shows teachers rarely implement materials exactly as designed, instead using their professional judgment to modify and supplement them as needed (Remillard, 2005).

The design tension between the curriculum developers' intent and teachers' practical needs became evident in this study. The materials purchased from TPT followed a familiar pattern, where the design intent did not align with classroom realities, confusing students and frustrating the teacher. This gap between the curriculum's framework and the dynamic needs of real classrooms aligns with research findings that highlight the necessity for flexible curriculum materials (Remillard, 2005).

Curriculum adaptation is essential when materials are too rigid or misaligned with student needs. Teachers must often select, interpret, and adjust curriculum components to better support student learning objectives (Beyer & Davis, 2012). In our case, the inadequate quality and clarity of the TPT materials further underscored the importance of adaptation. Teachers frequently rely on their professional expertise to adapt curricula, whether by omitting, modifying, or expanding certain aspects to suit their classroom environment (Tomlinson, 2011; McGrath, 2013), and this is how it occurred in our instance.

### **The Learning Process**

The impact on the learning process was equally significant. From my observational notes, student disposition towards the curriculum was generally neutral. Apart from students expressing confusion and one student experiencing frustration, the curriculum neither excited nor burdened them significantly. Regarding the student who appeared frustrated, it is essential to note that this student was already having a difficult day. The student felt confused with the questioning of the underlined text, and that seemed to exacerbate their emotions. I do not believe this incident indicated that specific students' or the other students' overall opinions on the curriculum.

The fact that the curriculum did not excite the students may reflect a critical missed opportunity in providing students with engaging, pertinent content that stimulated their imaginations and world view – all endeavors that align with the classrooms and the school's goals. This aligns with findings from researchers like Hu et al. (2018), who noted that many TPT materials consist of low-cognitive-demand tasks, limiting opportunities for engaging learning. The lack of excitement might suggest that the curriculum materials did not encourage students to explore content in ways that resonated with their interests or encouraged meaningful participation (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Despite my efforts to adapt and refine the TPT materials, their flaws hindered effective instruction. Research suggests that poorly designed materials, particularly those that confuse or mislead teachers, can lead to sub-optimal teaching, which can slow the learning process (Hubisz, 2003; Kesidou & Roseman, 2002).

Engaging students with relevant and thought-provoking content is crucial for fostering a learning environment that encourages curiosity and critical thinking (Boaler, 1996), both of which were not present in these TPT materials. Despite my efforts to adapt and refine the TPT materials, the flaws made them challenging. The time used to account for the flaws took away from my instruction. This inherently gave students a compromised learning experience. Ironically, TPT was a detriment to the same learning experience it aimed to improve.

The experience from this case study contributes to the scarce but growing literature on the quality of TPT's offerings, which indicates a lack of quality and rigor (Hu et al., 2018; Polikoff & Dean, 2019, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2019; Wessman-Enzinger & Hertel, 2017). Unlike commercially produced curricula, materials uploaded to TPT do not undergo a rigorous evaluation process before being made available (Bentley, 2020). In a survey administered by NewSchools-Gallup, 73 percent of teachers and administrators reported feeling inadequately informed about the digital resources they were considering (Klein, 2019). More importantly, 65% of teachers reported that they had jettisoned a digital resource shortly after they began piloting (Klein, 2019). These survey findings mirror the findings documented in this case study, supporting Tosh et al.'s (2020) assertion that teachers rely on trial and error instead of rigorous evidence with their digital resources. And I assert that this trial and error cumulates into a gamble with the teacher's monetary funds.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

My research indicates significant issues with the quality of materials available on TPT. However, this does not negate the platform's effective marketing, positioning it as the premier source of supplemental educational resources. In fact, I believe that Jenn's and I's experience is likely typical. Because it felt like second nature to use the platform, it might actually suggest that TPT's marketing strategies were successful in integrating the platform into the standard daily practice for teachers.

As the data analysis presented in this manuscript show, there were issues with curriculum quality. With discernment and a thorough understanding of the teaching process, it is easy to identify issues about the materials' quality. However, another problem lies in the moral implications of teachers gambling their money on these resources. The research shows that teachers frequently rely on online platforms to source materials, making this a pervasive aspect that seems part of the educational culture now. A viable solution to teachers gambling with their own monetary capital is with Open Education Resources (OER). I assert that if OER are used more by teachers, it could solve the issue of gambling money to find curriculum materials

### ***Open Educational Resources***

The 2002 UNESCO (2002) forum coined the term Open Education Resources and defined them as “The open provision of educational resources, enabled by information and communication technologies, for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes.” (p. 24) The goal of OER is to create free, universally accessible curriculum materials that anyone could use for the teaching and learning process (Hilton, 2016). Significant progress toward UNESCO's vision has been made, including developing courses, textbooks, videos, journals, and other educational resources available under the Creative

Commons license (Johnstone, 2005). Johnstone (2005) clarifies that the OER's goal was not to replace institutionally supported curriculum materials. Rather, it is a means of sharing interesting, unique resources with individuals who would not have otherwise had them.

Despite initiatives to create universally accessible curriculum materials, surveys have shown that teachers are unfamiliar with OER. A survey of 2707 faculty members at an institution of higher education in Florida found that only 7 percent of faculty were very familiar with Open Access textbooks. 52 percent of that population had never heard of the concept (Morris-Babb & Henderson, 2012). A different nationally representative survey of 2144 educators revealed that only 34 percent of respondents knew what OER are (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Open licenses are critical to OER (Bissell, 2009). As UNESCO created its vision of OER, it continued to contend with the issue of Copyright (D'Antoni, 2009). Consequently, materials considered OER must have a Creative Commons (CC) License, allowing educators to share, edit, and adapt (D'Antoni, 2009). CC license will enable teachers to create material and pro-actively permit them to use it if attribution is credited to the creator.

Research has shown that OER can decrease the educational cost of K-12 families (Tang & Bao, 2021). This finding is advantageous as students get into secondary education, which tends to have a higher cost of participation when students need to purchase books, lab equipment, and other resources (D. Wiley et al., 2012). Research has also shown that OER does not cause a decrease in student performance (Hilton et al., 2019), and in some cases, test scores rose due to the introduction of OER (Robinson et al., 2014). But most critically to the present research, OER affords a broader range of curriculum options *for free*.

### ***Implications for Policy – Preservice Teachers***

The implications of platforms like Teachers Pay Teachers (TPT) for preservice teachers and preservice teacher education are particularly significant. McMeans (2015) argues that preservice teachers are more likely to utilize Internet social media sites because they have grown up in the digital age, which fosters a greater comfort level with online resources. As these preservice teachers filter into their in-service roles, they are likely to continue using these same practices that were fostered throughout their preservice tenure (Sawyer & Myers, 2018). As such, research shows has shown that preservice teachers and teachers in their first few years of practice have difficulty critiquing and adapting curriculum to fit their students' needs (Cervetti et al., 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Gee, 2010). Based on the observation that preservice teachers are more likely to encounter these digital resources, I suggest teacher preparation programs should give serious attention to helping preservice teachers understand how to critique and adapt online resources specifically. This suggestion is vital because without the skills to critically assess and modify the materials they access, new teachers may struggle to meet the diverse needs of their students. By equipping preservice teachers with the ability to critique and adapt curriculum, teacher education programs can better prepare them to leverage digital tools effectively, ensuring that their teaching is responsive, inclusive, and tailored to enhance student learning outcomes.

### **Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

One limitation of this study was the small sample size. Even within the classroom, only a small fraction of students received the intense, targeted instruction necessary to evaluate the curriculum materials thoroughly. It is possible that a different group of students, or a larger group, may have responded differently to the materials, potentially resulting in varied outcomes.

Another limitation is that the data primarily rely on the teacher/researcher perspective. Incorporating student feedback through surveys or interviews could have provided a richer understanding of how the curriculum impacted engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking. Offering students a voice in reflecting on their experiences with the curriculum, despite its shortcomings, might have yielded different insights and outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

I presume many well-meaning sellers on the TPT platform want to make a difference and provide high-quality instruction. However, the main problem with TPT is not sub-par materials. Even with OER, teachers would necessarily encounter sub-par materials. The main problem is the inability to vet these materials prior to purchasing, which turns the selection into a gamble. The argument here is not that OER should replace commercially produced curriculum entirely—while this *could* be a beneficial future direction, it falls outside the scope of this manuscript. Instead, OER provides a viable solution to the issue of teachers spending their own money on curriculum of which the quality is unknown.

Recognizing quality in curriculum materials is no easy task; it demands intense scrutiny to ensure they meet the specific needs of a teacher's local context. This scrutiny is essential for delivering high-quality instruction to students. Discerning curriculum and understanding how to critique and adapt it is something that the teacher preparation programs should keep as a focus. This manuscript illuminates the tension in balancing multiple responsibilities and the lack of time to design instructional materials. This tension is what drives teachers to TPT in the first place.

Ultimately, this manuscript relays the need for better support systems for teachers to access reliable, high-quality materials without personal financial risk. Advocating for the

increased use of OER could alleviate this issue, ensuring educators have access to the resources needed to provide students with high-quality instruction.

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