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**EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF IMPLEMENTATION FIDELITY MANDATES ON
INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES IN K-8 SETTINGS:
A CRITICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY**

By

Anita Hopkins

B.S. University of Southern Maine, 1985

M.Ed. University of Maine, 2015

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

(in Educational Leadership)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2024

Advisory Committee:

Maria Frankland, Ph.D., Lecturer of Educational Leadership, Dissertation Chair

Catharine Biddle, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Educational Leadership

Esther A. Enright, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership

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An abstract of the Dissertation Presented
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This dissertation critically examines the landscape of educational practices concerning the implementation of commercial instructional programs in K-8 schools. Commencing with a historical exploration of pivotal educational reforms, including A Nation at Risk, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the research traces the evolution of accountability measures and the consequential emphasis on scripted commercial programs. The central focus of inquiry is the impact of fidelity mandates on teacher autonomy and responsiveness to diverse student needs.

Employing a qualitative research design, this study delves into the attitudes and perceptions of exemplary K-8 teachers regarding fidelity mandates for district-adopted commercial programs in reading and mathematics. Additionally, it investigates leadership attitudes and practices contributing to teachers' sense of agency and efficacy in relation to student outcomes. The conceptual framework provides a lens through which to examine teachers' processes of sensemaking as they attempt to integrate fidelity mandates with responsive teaching practices. It examines how teachers' perceptions, experiences, and context shape their

understanding and adaptation of such mandates, enabling them to strike a balance between following leadership directives and providing personalized, relevant, effective instruction.

The research questions aim to uncover how teachers navigate district mandates concerning fidelity and how leadership practices influence teacher autonomy and efficacy. The study operates on the assumption that students possess unique learning needs, and effective teaching involves tailoring instruction to address these differences. The research sample, comprising 11 exemplary teachers identified through objective measures, offers insights into diverse school settings and the challenges associated with fidelity mandates.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform educational leaders and policymakers about the nuanced relationship between fidelity mandates, teacher agency, and student outcomes. By acknowledging the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach through standardized programs, the study advocates for responsive teaching practices that empower teachers to make informed instructional decisions based on the individual needs of their students. The findings aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding educational policies and practices, fostering a student-centered and equitable approach to instruction.

Keywords: scripted curriculum, responsive teaching, technical teaching, teacher agency, teacher autonomy, exemplary teachers, professional judgment, fidelity, implementation, leadership practices, sensemaking

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

In 1983, the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education published a report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report asserted that the country's schools were failing due to lack of rigor and adequate time for students to gain necessary skills and knowledge. The report further concluded that teachers were ill-prepared and underpaid (Edwards & Allred, 1993). In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act sought to guarantee all students a high-quality education in an effort to close the achievement gap for all subsets of students, including economically disadvantaged students, students from diverse racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited proficiency in the English language (North Central Regional Educational Lab, 2002). NCLB mandated high-stakes accountability measures, marking the beginning of an era of even more intense scrutiny and criticism of the nation's teachers (Wronowski & Urick, 2021). Standardized testing became a make-or-break scenario which had the capacity to greatly influence the public's faith in schools and teachers (Dodge, 2009; Jones, 2009). As NCLB placed a strong emphasis on standardized testing, it became clear among educational stakeholders that a comprehensive and unified approach to educational standards was warranted (Fang et al., 2004).

Politicians, education policy makers, and the general public had for decades expressed discontent with school performance outcomes. In response to this discontent as well as in response to accountability demands of NCLB, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were developed in 2010 by the Council of Chief State School Officers, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education throughout the United States. The CCSS, which were designed to increase academic expectations nationwide by providing a shared framework of grade-level standards in English

and mathematics (Cohen et al., 2022), were eventually adopted by more than 40 states (Rowan & White, 2022). From 2009 to 2015, the federal government implemented its Race to the Top reform initiative, which was a competitive grant program that incentivized states to adopt the CCSS and its aligned testing tools, track student data over time, and include student performance measures in teacher and administrator evaluation systems (Brass & Holloway, 2021). Then in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB. ESSA shifted accountability to states and allowed student growth measures to be used as academic indicators (Portz & Beauchamp, 2020). In response to the pressures of NCLB, CCSS, and ESSA, educational publishing companies raced to develop and profit from highly scripted math and reading programs (Vaughn et al., 2022).

The attention on education resulting from years of reform measures brought increased emphasis on teacher evaluation systems, inflexible accountability systems, and a myriad of school improvement models. Consequently, schools often turn to scripted commercial programs as a vehicle to improve student achievement (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). Most teachers would agree that no one program can meet the instructional needs of all students at all times. Yet, in an effort to hold educators accountable, many schools require teachers to follow commercial programs with strict fidelity (Century et al., 2010). Teachers are often given pacing schedules that force them into moving instruction forward regardless of whether their students have mastered skills (Kilby-Chesley, 2022). Rather than putting teacher judgment at the center of classroom decision-making, this cedes control over instructional decision-making to the authors of commercial programs – authors who have no intimate knowledge of the actual students in any given classroom and who often view learning and assessment through a limited, industrial lens (Brass & Holloway, 2021).

Explicit and implicit policies exist in every work environment. In the school setting, expectations regarding the selection and use of district-adopted programs may be explicit, with formally stated rules, protocols, or policies, or implicit, involving unwritten norms that influence the school environment (Cobb & Jackson, 2012). Formal school policies are written with the intent of supporting student learning through high-quality instructional practices. Some policies address educator training in support of those high-quality instructional practices, with those most effective in facilitating professional learning involving “expert guidance, ongoing intentional learning events in which tools are used to bridge to practice, carefully designed organizational routines . . . and the use of new tools whose incorporation into practice is supported” (Cobb & Jackson, 2012, p. 487). While school districts prioritize formal policy implications when making budget decisions, professional development led by individual building leaders - which is more likely to be driven by implicit, building-specific policies - is less likely to produce long-lasting, systemic improvement (Cobb & Jackson, 2012). A thorough search of school websites reveals that several Maine school districts are guided by written policies regarding curriculum development and adoption yet have no formal policies regarding implementation.

Curriculum refers to the set of learning expectations and assessments in each content area at each grade level, while *program* refers to the commercial curricular resources used by a school or district to deliver instruction (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). Many school stakeholders fail to appreciate this distinction, and, in my personal experience, some school leaders and teachers use the terms interchangeably. This is problematic because it can lead to a hyperfocus on a commercial program rather than a full consideration of the complete set of learning goals as defined by the district.

District or building-level expectations regarding teacher fidelity to commercial programs can be difficult to gauge because this is often a reflection of leadership practice rather than written policy. My experience of having worked in several school districts supports the notion that different schools within the same district may have varying expectations, depending upon the leadership orientation of the building principal. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of their obligation to follow programs with fidelity may not match their leaders' expectations, especially if there have not been intentional discussions regarding fidelity.

Background

As I sat for my third interview for the position of K-5 principal at a small, rural school, I clearly recall being told that I needed to understand that my prospective district was an "adoption district." I took this to mean that the district had adopted certain commercial curricular programs in reading, writing, and math, and that teachers were expected to use these programs as the core vehicle by which to deliver instruction. About a month and a half into my new job, I learned that this meant much more. After classroom observations and conversations with teachers, particularly about what a subset of students needed instructionally, I had planned to purchase a \$30 fluency kit as a resource for teachers to address specific skill deficits that were evident for those students. I was subsequently told that I could not do so, because this \$30 kit was not being used in all district schools and had not been vetted by the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) committee. In my frustration, I wondered why I had been hired if I was not allowed to use my professional knowledge and judgment in serving as the school's instructional leader. I struggled to make sense of my role, as teachers struggled to make sense of policies and protocols that did not allow them to respond to students' needs.

As time progressed, there was great upheaval in district administration and, therefore, in district oversight and practices around instruction. As a result, I was able to gradually introduce instructional practices and resources that were informed by my education, by almost three decades in the classroom, and by relevant student data. Although I knew that shifting practice takes time, I naively thought that all teachers would readily embrace new practices if that meant that more children were included in grade-level conversations and instruction, and that more children would demonstrate success in the classroom.

Yet, I continued to observe several teachers throughout the district persist in strictly following scripted lessons and district pacing guides regardless of what student data revealed. If students failed to respond to this instruction, they were inevitably referred to Response to Intervention (RTI) educators. At the time, RTI instruction in my district often mirrored classroom practices at a slower pace or consisted of scaffolded support designed to help a student complete classroom assignments without addressing foundational skills. If a child was unable to meet grade level expectations despite RTI assistance, they were eventually referred to special education. I did not see much evidence that all teachers felt empowered to shift their instruction within the classroom to better meet the needs of students. One teacher told me that she had been required to sign a document stating that she would follow the district programs “with fidelity.” Despite communicating to teachers that methods did not matter to me nearly as much as results, many teachers seemed to have internalized the previous messages around fidelity, and they did not consistently demonstrate confidence in their own agency in adjusting instructional practices in response to students’ needs.

There are many factors which affect school culture, including teacher accountability concerns (Smith & Holloway, 2020). In an effort to increase student academic outcomes, many

school districts mandate implementation to scripted programs. If the district provides professional development, it is often around adherence to these programs. Such training may or may not be relevant for teachers as they attempt to meet the needs of all students, including those who do not respond to the core instruction provided by strict program fidelity (Jaffe-Walter & Fancsali, 2021). As a result, teachers can feel demotivated because they are not addressing the needs of all learners, which may lead them to question their effectiveness as educators (Mboweni & Matshidiso, 2022).

Prescriptive practices involving instruction in schools are often criticized as diminishing teachers' professional agency (Unsworth & Tummons, 2021). District directives to follow instructional scripts developed by the authors of commercial programs, while perhaps well-intentioned, show little regard for the professional judgment of teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017-18), the average age of teachers in Maine is 45 years. This means that many teachers began their careers around the time of the passage of NCLB, under the microscope of scrutiny and accountability, in schools that encourage adherence to a scripted program and, perhaps inadvertently, discourage independent teacher thinking and responsive teaching. School districts are often engaged in efforts to control and standardize instruction, assumingly in an effort to provide equity of access to high-quality instruction for all students (Cobb & Jackson, 2012; Cohen et al., 2022; Donaldson et al., 2021; Leithwood, 2021). Ironically, precisely because students have diverse learning needs, standardizing their instruction can create inequity of access to the type of quality instruction that they need to succeed (Andrews et al., 2016). This could be related to the belief that teachers operating under fidelity mandates may hold that they do not have the agency to respond to diverse individual learning needs. In my experience as an administrator, teachers might recognize this but may have little

knowledge and experience to address the issue. Their sole teaching experience is often technical teaching, which places the instructional focus on following a scripted program and which does not develop teachers' professional skills to respond to and meet the needs of individual learners.

Problem of Practice

In response to the public's criticism in the wake of NCLB, CCSS, and ESSA, schools across the country have made attempts to provide curricular programs which lead to improved student outcomes. Many schools believe that fidelity to scripted commercial programs in various content areas, particularly reading and math, are the preferred path to success for students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020), and thus design professional development opportunities that emphasize such fidelity. In fact, there is a scarcity of research that establishes a direct relationship between student achievement and fidelity of implementation of scripted programs (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Conversely, there is some research that indicates that teachers' individual content skill levels and the quality of instruction they provide to students is a more positive predictor of student achievement than fidelity of implementation and adherence to a scripted commercial program (Capin et al., 2022).

Teachers make hundreds of decisions in the moment every day (Blackley et al., 2021; Klein, 2021), and scripted programs are designed to alleviate some of those instructional decisions. Despite the adoption of such programs, many students are failing to reach proficiency in reading and math, leading to ever-increasing criticism of teachers and schools (Pate, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2022). Relevant to this discussion is the recent reignition of what is known in educational circles as the "reading wars," which have simmered for at least 50 years (Goldberg & Goldberg, 2022; Kim & Snow, 2021). The reading wars debate bubbled to the top of issues in education with the release of the podcast series, *Sold a Story* (Hanford, 2022-23). Hanford

asserted that a dominant commercial reading program in the United States, which has been used in most states and which earned its publisher at least \$1.6 billion, in fact is not aligned with research about how children learn to read and has failed countless students (Hanford, 2022-23). Regardless of which side of the debate an educator lands, this condemnation of a common commercial curricular program represents a call to action. In the face of such criticism educators are compelled to elevate their expectations and critically assess the quality of instructional practices in ways that are responsive to student needs..

Educational policies consistently outline specific learning objectives for students, yet they often fall short in providing explicit curricular or pedagogical guidance for teachers (Cohen et al., 2022). Raising expectations for our nation's students must involve the development of new ways of assessing classroom instruction. Individual classroom observations "can provide important but insufficient information about the broader terrain of instructional quality that is conceptually aligned with new standards" (Cohen et al., 2012, p. 1264). Rather, a fuller picture of instructional quality may be obtained by observing a sequence of lessons over time or by building less-visible elements, such as collaboration with colleagues, into supervision practices. Cohen et al. (2022) further argue that because teachers take cues for informing their practice from observation protocols, and because districts use current observation results to inform professional development opportunities, it is incumbent upon schools to develop structures and practices that lead to realization of ambitious learning goals (Cohen et al., 2012).

Teachers operating under strict fidelity mandates currently do not often have the autonomy to use their professional judgment to engage in responsive teaching, which involves designing instruction that best matches the daily needs of struggling learners. In order to realize the goal of organizing classrooms, schools, and districts to better support student learning, policy

makers must honor the people closest to the actual work of schools and strive to understand the obstacles they face in the classroom, engaging them in creating supports that align with those obstacles (Bryk et al., 2015). Focusing on student achievement measures while neglecting to support teachers and their professional judgment is ill-advised (Mette & Riegel, 2018).

Advocacy for an environment that champions teachers' professional judgment converges naturally with the realm of curricular and instructional design, highlighting the connectedness between educator agency and the structured frameworks that shape effective learning experiences.

A counter argument can be made that overconfidence in teacher judgment may carry the risk of bias toward some students. Teachers' perceptions of student competence can be influenced by bias, leading them to underestimate or overestimate certain students' abilities. This can affect the level of support and opportunities provided to students, potentially perpetuating inequalities in educational outcomes. The psychological phenomenon known as the Pygmalion effect occurs when teachers hold high expectations for their students' academic success in ways that can alter their support for these students and positively influence students' motivation, effort, and performance, ultimately leading to improved outcomes (Babad et al., 1982; Rowe & O'Brien, 2002). Conversely, another psychological phenomenon known as the Golem effect demonstrates that when teachers hold low expectations for their students' abilities or potential, teacher support may be reduced and students' confidence, motivation, and effort can be undermined, leading to decreased performance and academic achievement (Babad et al., 1982; Rowe & O'Brien, 2002). The premise of standards-based school reform is rooted in the belief that every student has the potential to meet high expectations (Schwartz, 2023), and commercial curricular programs embed consistent grade level standards that can provide valuable guidance

for teachers (Cobb & Jackson, 2012; Cohen et al., 2022; Donaldson et al., 2021; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Leithwood, 2021). Clarification of expected student competencies while supporting teachers' professional judgment and sense of efficacy is fundamental in responding to student needs (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020).

My own experience in education has prompted me to look at student progress through the lens of technical teaching versus responsive teaching. (Figure 1). Mandated implementation fidelity of scripted commercial curricular programs represents technical instruction in which teachers have little agency over their own instructional practices. Alternately, responsive instruction promotes teacher agency in adjusting or supplementing scripted programs to address specific needs of individual students.

Technical teaching involves following a commercial program. These programs are typically scripted for the teacher and adhere to a pacing schedule set either by the district or the program itself. With technical teaching, instructional decisions are mainly influenced by guidance around the commercial program. Student understanding may be gauged either by checkpoints incorporated throughout the instructional unit or an end-of-unit test. Regardless of student understanding, the teacher is compelled to continue the instruction to match the pacing guide. Instruction follows a linear progression, with little freedom to address individual student needs or tolerance for using resources outside of the core program. This may lead to some students falling further behind until they are referred for intervention outside of the classroom.

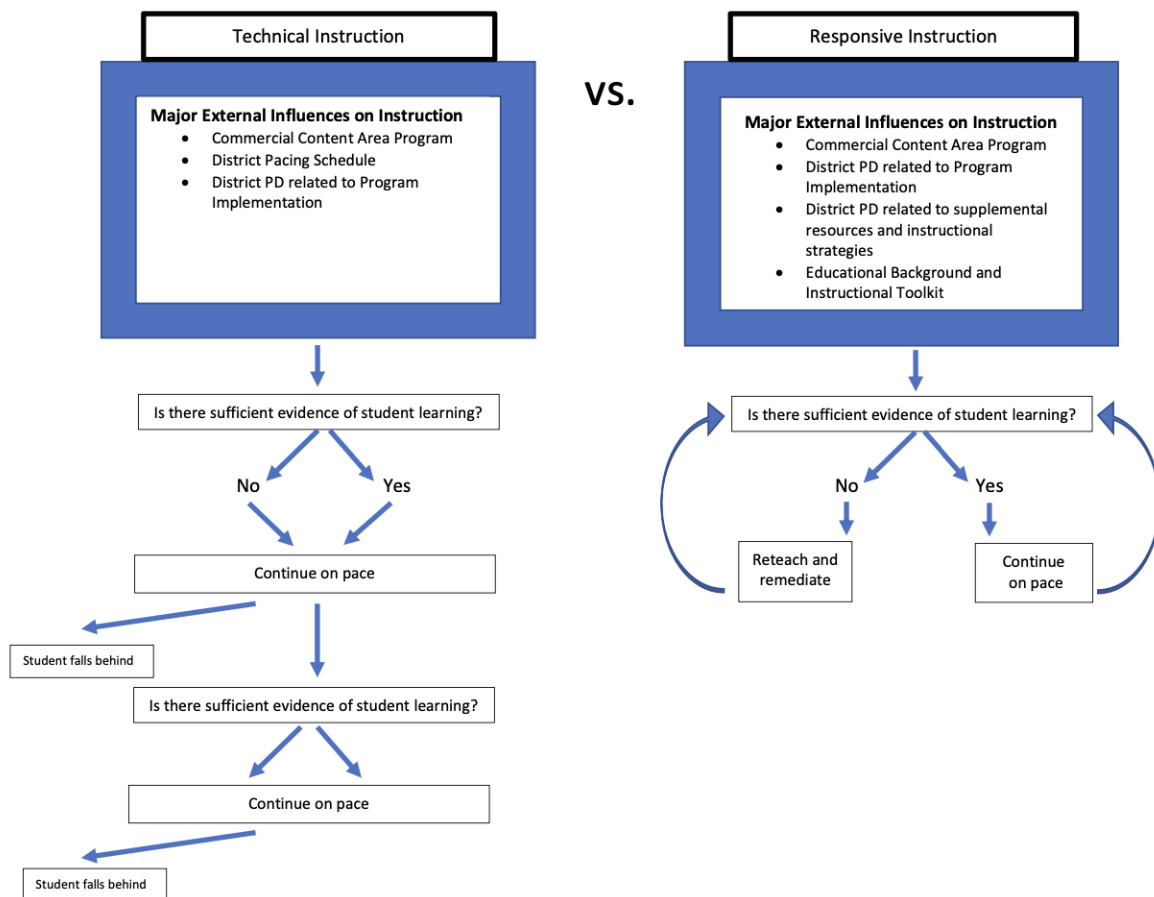
By contrast, responsive teaching is informed not only by the commercial program but also by the teacher's own knowledge of the content, supplemental resources, and instructional strategies. It involves checking for understanding at strategic checkpoints throughout an instructional unit, regardless of whether those checkpoints are built into the commercial program,

and then responding to student needs. Teacher agency allows the teacher to use supplemental resources as needed and to shift the instructional plan to match the needs of all students.

Instruction more closely mirrors how children learn: rather than being linear, it is more dynamic and cyclical. Teachers are able to reteach and remediate as necessary, using scaffolding strategies and resources with whole group, small group, and individual instruction until there is sufficient demonstration of student learning. In this way, fewer students fall through the cracks, overall student proficiency rises, and the number of students referred for intervention drops.

Figure 1

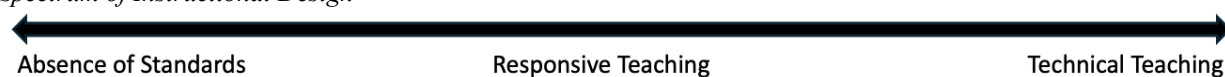
Technical vs. Responsive Instruction



A third approach to instruction might help to place responsive teaching along a spectrum of instructional design. (Figure 2). On one end of the spectrum might be instructional conditions marked by the absence of established standards or learning goals, where all instructional decisions are completely at the discretion of the classroom teacher. This could lead to inconsistent expectations, and thus achievement, from classroom to classroom within the same school, district, or state. On the other end of the spectrum might be technical teaching that results from blind adherence to a scripted program, without consideration of individual student needs. Responsive teaching would fall in the middle of these two extremes, blending teacher judgment and adaptation to student needs with consistent educational expectations and benchmarks.

Figure 2

Spectrum of Instructional Design



Curricular and instructional design is essential in supporting learning and promoting student engagement, and should “acknowledge students’ prior knowledge and experiences while expanding over time into new areas; foster student voice and agency; and feature engaging, relevant content, well-scaffolded instruction that supports the personalization of learning” (Cantor et al., 2021, p. 26). Wholesale adoption of commercial programs demands great investment of time, financial resources, and human capital, but often leads to the same disappointing results (Bryk et al., 2015). It is imperative that schools address the needs of diverse learners. Minor (2019) states this eloquently:

Inflexibly following mandates, curriculum, or educational fads puts us at odds with or robs us of the ability to see nuance, just as doing things as they have always been done or

teaching to the test can prevent us from teaching to the children assembled before us.

Under this weight, our students become data points; they lose their personhood. (p. 11)

A balanced approach to instruction that values adaptability, student-centeredness, and the preservation of students' personhood is necessary. Educators and educational leaders must resist the temptation to prioritize mandates or educational fads over the nuanced, individualized needs of their students, ensuring that teaching remains a human-centered endeavor focused on fostering holistic growth and development.

Purpose Statement

Researchers in education and psychology have spent much time and effort adding to the knowledge base about how children learn. Schools must use this knowledge to create systems and structures that respect learners' individual differences and needs. Human development involves the interplay of multiple factors, including genetics, relationships, and cultural and contextual factors, and is not linear but is instead a dynamic progression (Cantor & Osher 2021). While all children are vulnerable, their environments can offer advantages that promote resilience and lead to healthy development and learning. According to Cantor et al. (2021), "students are active agents in their own learning, with multiple neural, relational, experiential, and contextual processes converging to produce their unique developmental range and performance" (p. 9). Considering the body of knowledge that surrounds children's diverse paths to development and learning, it seems an act of folly to rely on a prescribed commercial curricular program to address all children's needs in equitable ways.

It appears intuitive that highly effective teachers are those who employ teaching strategies that consistently lead to positive student outcomes. "Effective teachers manage to produce better achievement results regardless of which curriculum materials, pedagogical

approach, or reading program they use” (Allington, 2002). Through my research I aspired to identify and document best practices that can be shared and replicated in other educational settings. By understanding what makes exemplary teachers successful, it is my hope that educators and educational leaders can work toward creating more equitable, effective, and impactful outcomes for all students. This study examined practices of K-8 exemplary teachers regarding pedagogical practices and instructional decision-making and explored how those practices and decisions relate to fidelity to commercial programs and teacher perceptions of autonomy and self-efficacy. This study will further serve to inform leadership practices regarding fidelity of implementation of commercial instructional programs and the design of professional development opportunities that prioritize student learning over tightly prescribed teaching practices.

Research Questions

In this study, I investigated teacher attitudes and perceptions regarding fidelity to district-adopted programs and their own autonomy related to instructional decisions that represent the best interests of their students. Two research questions guided this work:

- 1) What stance do exemplary teachers take toward district mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of district-adopted commercial programs in reading and mathematics?
- 2) What leadership attitudes and practices around implementation fidelity and professional developmental opportunities contribute to responsive teaching practices?

Conceptual Framework

This study examined the ways that highly effective teachers assimilate mandates around fidelity of implementation of commercial curricular programs. Weick's sensemaking framework, originally developed in organizational theory, is relevant to this work (Ancona, 2012). Directives

issued by school districts to strictly follow instructional scripts provided by commercial reading programs, though well-meaning, may ignore teachers' professional expertise and the diverse learning requirements of students. Paradoxically, standardizing instruction for students with diverse learning needs may worsen inequality in accessing quality education, as it overlooks the need for personalized approaches tailored to individual learning contexts (Andrews et al., 2016). This leaves teachers struggling to make sense of their role and efficacy in moving students toward learning targets. Teachers must further engage in sensemaking around reconciling fidelity mandates that may reinforce technical teaching with responsive teaching practices. I will explore Weick's sensemaking framework and its relevance to this study further in the review of literature in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a qualitative design methodology, taking a critical perspective to examine the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of exemplary teachers as they interpret expectations of fidelity mandates regarding commercial reading and math programs. Qualitative research is preferred when existing theory does not fully address the complexity of an issue, allowing for an investigation of the issue through the lens of research participants (Tomita et al., 2021). An interpretivist stance studies others' perceptions of phenomena, in this case the phenomenon of fidelity mandates as they impact teacher agency and instructional decision-making, and then analyzes and interprets participants' intentions and actions (Glesne, 2016). As stated by Goldkuhl (2012), constructive knowledge is an essential feature of pragmatism. Accordingly, I adopted an interpretivist and pragmatic stance as I endeavored to understand the actions and interactions of teachers relative to fidelity mandates in their workplace. The goal of this research was to generate constructive knowledge that will help inform not only field

educators as they refine instructional practices, but that will also inform educational leadership practices related to fidelity of implementation of commercial programs.

Definitions

Throughout this research report, several terms are used which may have alternative meanings or connotations. Following is a list of such terms along with the intended meanings within this report.

Behaviorism is a psychological theory of learning that focuses on observable behaviors, suggesting that they are influenced by external stimuli and shaped through conditioning processes.

Cognitivism is a psychological theory of learning that emphasizes the role of internal mental processes, such as perception, memory, and problem-solving.

Constructivism is a psychological theory of learning that asserts that learners actively construct their understanding of the world by assimilating new information with existing knowledge and experiences, emphasizing the importance of hands-on, experiential learning.

Curriculum refers to the set of grade level learning targets and assessments established for each content area within a school administrative unit, especially if distinct from the goals of the commercial program.

Curricular program or *program* refers to the primary curricular instructional resource used in a school administrative unit to help students meet grade level curriculum targets.

Exemplary teacher refers to an educator who consistently models effective teaching strategies leading to demonstrated positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for their students.

Fidelity of implementation refers to the degree to which a commercial program is followed according to the script and pacing guidelines provided by the publisher. For the purposes of this research report, fidelity of implementation also refers to the extent to which teachers are expected to follow – and in reality strictly adhere to – the script and pacing guidelines as determined by the program publishers.

Humanism is a psychological theory of learning that prioritizes the holistic development of learners, focusing on their individual needs, interests, and capabilities, while emphasizing personal growth, self-directed learning, and the realization of human potential.

Responsive teaching refers to instructional practice that considers, adjusts, and responds to the diverse needs of students in any given classroom.

Teacher agency refers to the capacity of educators to make professional decisions and take proactive actions to shape their own teaching practices and classroom environments in alignment with their values, expertise, and the needs of their students.

Teacher efficacy refers to the extent to which teachers hold confidence and belief in their capability to positively impact students' academic achievement and overall learning experience.

Technical teaching refers to strict adherence in following a scripted program, regardless of the individual progress or needs of students.

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed that students in a classroom have unique learning needs, abilities, and experiences and that best practice dictates that teachers should tailor their instruction to address these differences. I also assumed that culture, language, and socioeconomic factors impact learning and teaching, and that the classroom is a dynamic, ever-changing environment.

For this reason, teachers need to be flexible and adaptable in response to student needs, questions, and interests.

Scope and Limitations

This study involved a small research sample of 11 exemplary elementary and middle school teachers of reading or math in Maine. Exemplary teachers were identified by virtue of their selection as Maine County Teachers of the Year. As such, these teachers were identified through consistent, objective measures as set by the Maine Department of Education and the Educate Maine organization to be exemplary in their field (mainetoy.org). While the sample size is small, these teachers represent a broad cross section of districts in the state, with varying district and school sizes and varying rurality. The 11 participants are teacher leaders who have worked extensively with peers within their school systems as well as throughout the state and are articulate in presenting a well-rounded picture of the circumstances under which teachers and students may succeed relative to fidelity mandates.

Significance

Many school districts, in an effort to improve student academic outcomes, mandate that teachers adhere to instructional scripts provided by the creators of commercial instructional programs. Such mandates are often viewed as weakening teachers' professional agency (Unsworth & Tummons, 2021) because they show little regard for the professional judgment of teachers. School districts often employ fidelity mandates to control and standardize instruction in an attempt to provide equal access to high-quality instruction for all students. However, because teachers who feel scrutinized under fidelity mandates may not feel that they have the agency to respond to diverse individual learning needs, this standardization of instruction may instead increase inequity (Andrews et al., 2016). Despite the widespread adoption of commercial

programs and the fidelity mandates that often accompany them, many students are failing to reach proficiency in reading and math, leading to continued disparagement of teachers and schools (Vaughn et al., 2022).

In this study, I endeavored to describe how teachers engage in responsive instructional approaches that empower them to use their professional judgment when designing and implementing instruction. Results from this research will inform leadership practices around implementation of commercial instructional programs that support responsive teaching and teacher agency and professionalism. To better facilitate positive student outcomes, school leaders must support the efforts and decisions of teachers in the field (Bryk et al., 2015). This is echoed by Mette & Riegel (2018), who advise school leaders to avoid hyperfocusing on student achievement measures to the exclusion of supporting teachers and their professional judgment.

Summary

Schools represent the hope of our families and communities in providing students with the tools they need to thrive in a pluralistic society. It is imperative that we honor the unique needs of students with instruction that addresses those needs and does not leave them lagging behind. To that end, this study seeks to identify the conditions under which commercial instructional programs should be implemented in ways that best support all teachers and learners. In the following chapter, I will explore the research literature as it relates to teaching and learning as well as common practices of schools related to commercial scripted programs.

CHAPTER 2: Review of the Literature

In this literature review I will investigate the educational trends around scripted commercial instructional programs in K-8 schools. Of particular interest is the effect of mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of commercial programs on instructional practices as well as student achievement. In the following pages, I will first present findings related to the push toward accountability and prescriptive practices in schools. Next, I will report on research regarding how children learn, followed by an examination of practices around fidelity of implementation of commercial programs and how such practices influence responsive teaching and teachers' ability to address individual student needs around factors such as instructional pacing, learning modalities, and student identity. Finally, I will report on leadership practices related to the support of instructional paradigms.

Literature Search Strategy

In conducting a search of the research literature, several published books were used as resources for topics including learning theory, school accountability measures, teacher professionalism, agency, and self-efficacy, and responsive teaching for diverse student populations. These terms were also among those used to search databases through the University of Maine Fogler Library online system for peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, dissertations, reports, white papers, and policy briefs. Relevant databases include ERIC-Education (ProQuest) and Education Full Text. As learning theory has been developed over the course of the last several decades, publishing dates for information regarding learning theories include a very broad range. Sources regarding accountability in schools include publishing dates since 1993, while sources regarding responsive teaching are more recent, within the last ten years.

Conceptual Framework

Karl Weick's sensemaking framework, initially developed to inform organizational theory, can be applied in diverse settings such as business, healthcare, and emergency management and can be particularly relevant to the work of educators (Hodge & Stosich, 2022; Spillane et al., 2002). Sensemaking is grounded in cognitive and social psychology and generally refers to the process of creating meaning from information or experiences (Weick, 1995, as cited in Hodge & Stosich, 2022). When used as a framework, sensemaking provides a structure for understanding and navigating complex situations. According to sensemaking theory, individuals tend to interpret new or unforeseen situations by filtering them through the framework of their existing beliefs, past experiences, and social settings (Spillane et. al., 2002). Sensemaking is especially applicable in situations where information is ambiguous, incomplete, or rapidly changing. Weick (2012) himself asserts that "confusion need not immobilize us" (p. 150).

Weick's 1995 seminal work, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, named seven significant characteristics of sensemaking (Bingham et al., 2024). *Identity construction* refers to the concept that one's identity influences how individuals interpret the world around them. Simultaneously, the process of making sense of their experiences and surroundings contributes to the ongoing refinement of their identity. *Retrospection* is the act of assigning significance to events after they have occurred, which then influences how individuals interpret similar occurrences in the future. *Enactment* is the concept that individuals actively mold their surroundings through their responses within those environments. *Social activity* involves the notion that the process of sensemaking is not limited to individual efforts but rather is shaped collectively by and through interactions with others. Sensemaking is *ongoing*, implying that it is a continuous process without a fixed endpoint. It makes use of *extracted cues*, which are recognizable elements that

serve as the starting point from which individuals construct a broader understanding of a given situation. The inclination toward *plausibility over accuracy* suggests that in sensemaking, individuals may prioritize what seems believable over what is factually accurate. All seven of these critical characteristics of sensemaking, while not necessarily utilized sequentially, are considerations as teachers attempt to reconcile their roles as professionals with the sometimes conflicting demands of fidelity mandates, responsive teaching, and student progress.

Further refining the salience of sensemaking as a relevant framework in reconciling fidelity mandates with responsive teaching practices is the work of Weber and Glynn (2006). These researchers concur that crucial traits of the sensemaking process are that it is both ongoing and retrospective, and thus is dynamic rather than linear (Weber & Glynn, 2006). It is an iterative process that involves continuously gathering, interpreting, and reassessing information. The sensemaking process recognizes that understanding evolves over time as more data becomes available or as perspectives shift. Sensemaking consists of a frame of meaning, a prompt, and a connection, and can be driven by beliefs or by actions (Czarniawska, 2005).

Teachers working under strict fidelity mandates may experience dissonance when the results of their actions do not match their beliefs and sense of self - when students fail to respond to instructional resources and scripts provided by commercial programs. Weber and Glynn (2006) identify such a situation as a triggering mechanism, which is a type of input. They describe output as a person's "increased sensemaking activity and a desire to restore meaning. . . [as they] struggle to reconcile the tensions between different [conditions and mandates that] govern their work" (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1654). Sensemaking helps individuals and groups navigate uncertainty, providing a way to analyze and understand input that allows for more informed and contextually relevant decisions. It emphasizes the importance of learning from

experiences, whether positive or negative, and adjusting one's understanding and actions accordingly.

Sensemaking is embedded in the everyday, ordinary interactions of people, takes place across time and space, including under quickly changing conditions, and involves attending to multiple, sometimes conflicting narratives (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011). Any person who has spent time in schools can verify that such conditions describe teachers' realities.

We make our life and selves sensible in embedded and embodied moments of acting and speaking, narrative performances that reflect who we are and who we hope to be. We do so by responding, contesting, evoking, evading, imagining and confronting identity constructions by self and others. We may create some sort of sense - no matter how transient - from differing and disparate narratives if we can find justifications . . . for our and others' actions. In summary, 'making life sensible' is a complex interweaving of self-other, of retrospective and prospective, discursive and embodied, routine and creative, explicit and intuitive sensemaking (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011, pp. 69-70)

In the face of fidelity mandates which may detract from addressing individual student needs, Cunliffe and Coupland (2011) suggest that a sensemaking framework can guide how we view and understand how teachers construct their professional identities and navigate their roles through their actions and interactions within the educational setting. The process of sensemaking allows teachers to reconcile the tensions between their individual identities, personal integrity, and the external demands of fidelity mandates as they navigate the ever-evolving complexities of their professional practice.

Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework provides a theoretical lens for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to ambiguous or complex situations. It emphasizes the

iterative nature of sensemaking, the importance of social interactions in constructing meaning, and the role of enacted solutions in shaping future actions. In the context of this study, Weick's (1995) framework offers a path for examining how exemplary teachers interpret fidelity mandates, negotiate their implementation, and adapt their instructional practices in response to external and contextual factors.

Review of the Literature

The Push Toward Accountability and Prescriptive Practices

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, schools in the United States have been the focus of much criticism. Written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, this report concluded that education in the United States lacked rigor and adequate time for students to learn sufficiently and asserted that teachers were ill-prepared and underpaid (Edwards & Allred, 1993). The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 under President George W. Bush endeavored to ensure a quality education for all students, attempting to close the achievement gap for all subsets of students. NCLB legislated high-stakes accountability measures, ushering in an era of scrutiny for the nation's teachers (Bennett et al., 2013). Standardized testing became a high-stakes phenomenon which had the potential to make or break the public's faith in schools and teachers, as NCLB was the first federal legislation to link escalating consequences to schools' failure to meet defined proficiency benchmarks, up to and including school closure (Wronowski & Urick, 2021). NCLB expanded bureaucratic controls of teachers' professional decisions through the use of test-based accountability and the requirement of the use of "evidence-based" interventions as assessed by the federal Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse, which was a panel of bureaucrats and economists who approved or disapproved the commercial vendors and outside consultants with whom schools

could contract using NCLB funding (Brass & Holloway, 2021). While federal and state governments became steadily more involved in regulations around what to teach and how to teach (Allington, 2002), prepackaged commercial programs claiming to meet state and federal standards began to be seen as a quick and relatively easy fix (Fang et al., 2004).

In 2010 the Council of Chief State School Officers, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization composed of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education throughout the United States, created the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). These standards were eventually adopted by more than 40 states (Rowan & White, 2022). In response to the decades-long frustration with the nation's schools expressed by politicians, policy makers, and the public at large, the CCSS were designed to increase academic expectations nationwide, articulating rigorous grade-level standards in English and mathematics (Cohen et al., 2022). President Barack Obama's administration initiated its Race to the Top reform measures from 2009 to 2015. Race to the Top was a competitive grant program that encouraged states to adopt the CCSS and its aligned testing tools, track student data over time, and include student performance measures in teacher and administrator evaluation systems (Brass & Holloway, 2021). In 2015, NCLB was replaced by the Obama administration's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA shifted accountability to states and allowed student growth measures as academic indicators. ESSA also allowed the use of non-assessment indicators, such as student attendance metrics and measures of school climate, to provide a broader perspective of a school's success (Portz & Beauchamp, 2020).

In response to NCLB, CCSS, and ESSA educational publishing companies rushed to develop highly scripted math and reading programs (Vaughn et al., 2022). With increased emphasis on teacher evaluation systems, strict accountability measures, and school improvement

models, schools frequently turn to scripted commercial programs as a means by which to attempt to improve student achievement (Wronowski & Urick, 2021). Such programs often come with pacing schedules that move instruction forward regardless of whether students have mastered the skills necessary to demonstrate proficiency toward learning targets. As a result, teachers can feel a loss of self-efficacy and job satisfaction when students fail to make expected academic gains (Mboweni & Matshidiso, 2022).

Prescriptive practices involving instruction in schools are often criticized as diminishing teachers' professional agency (Unsworth & Tummons, 2021). Increased teacher autonomy has been shown to be associated with positive teacher morale, with teachers reporting greater work efficiency and job satisfaction, resulting in less teacher burnout (Salokangas et al., 2020). Certainly, schools have a moral responsibility to place student learning before the perceived culture and adult satisfaction, yet most would argue that the needs of these two populations - teachers and students - are not necessarily mutually exclusive. District directives to follow instructional scripts developed by the authors of commercial reading programs, while perhaps well-intentioned, show little regard for the professional judgment of teachers as well as for the needs of disparate learners. Ironically, because students have diverse learning needs, standardizing their instruction creates inequity of access to quality instruction, precisely because not all students are receiving the type of instruction in the contexts they need (Andrews et al., 2016).

For all students to succeed, teachers must “balance their energy and creativity across the three phases: frontloading success into every unit and lesson, pulling out all the stops during instruction, and following up afterwards, refusing to let students fail” (Marshall, 2016, p. 13). Teachers may recognize this but have little knowledge and experience to address the issue. Their

default instructional approach is often technical teaching - following a scripted program - which does not necessarily demonstrate or develop their professional skills to respond to and meet the needs of individual learners (Cohen et al., 2022; Toraman & Korkmaz, 2022). As a result, the field of education has witnessed a de-professionalization of instructional practices (Bartholdsson, 2021; Wronowski & Urick, 2021). At the heart of this issue is how teachers conceptualize providing instruction to struggling learners.

How Children Learn

Learning is at the center of human survival, and the nature of knowledge and how we know and learn have been central to much philosophical debate and investigation (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). A basic understanding of learning theories helps inform the design of instructional resources and practices in schools. Saunders and Wong (2020) cite four major learning theories or orientations that each offer different explanations of learning:

Behaviorism, based largely on the work of John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner, posits that learning is based on a person's interactions with their environment. Learning can result from manipulating the environment to promote favorable behaviors and discourage unfavorable behaviors. Behaviorism holds that learning involves an alteration in behavior, recognizing that behavior is learned and as such is highly dependent upon a person's particular experiences (Al-Shammari et al., 2019). Aspects of this theory can inform responsive teaching practices by emphasizing the importance of observable behaviors, environmental influences, reinforcement, and adaptation to individual differences.

Humanism has been associated with the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers and is a more self-directed model that validates the basic dignity of the individual. This learning orientation holds that people should be free to make their own choices and exercise control over

their environment. Humanism defines learning as an individual process of self-actualization that is deeply personal to each person (Saunders & Wong, 2020). Humanism may provide a theoretical and philosophical foundation for responsive teaching practices by prioritizing the individual learner, fostering autonomy and self-actualization, promoting positive relationships, and embracing a holistic view of education that supports students' intellectual, emotional, and social development.

Cognitivism is a learning theory advanced by the work of George Miller, Jean Piaget, and Benjamin Bloom. Cognitivists place the learner's own mental processes at the center of learning, as the learner works to connect new experiences and skills to their prior knowledge and mental schema (Al-Shammari et al., 2019). Cognitivism can inform responsive teaching practices by promoting active engagement, accommodating individual differences, fostering metacognitive skills, and integrating technology to support meaningful learning experiences.

Constructivism has its roots in the work of cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget. Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner are among other researchers who worked to develop this learning theory. Constructivists assert that people learn and create meaning through interactions with their environment, similar to behaviorists. However, constructivists recognize the importance of prior experiences in learning, believing that people interpret their new learning and situations through the lens of their current knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Teaching through a constructivist lens dictates that the educator must acknowledge and respect students' individual backgrounds, foundational comprehension, and assumptions when designing relevant instruction (Yilmaz, 2008). Constructivism provides a framework that supports responsive teaching practices by promoting active engagement, social interaction, scaffolding, and metacognition.

Also relevant to the conversation about how children learn is the work of Darling-Hammond et al. (2020). These researchers examined findings across multiple fields of study, including neurosciences, sociology, psychology, and developmental and learning sciences, to develop a framework that synthesizes insights regarding the science of learning and development. This framework highlights that people's learning is molded by a myriad of factors, and views students through a whole-child lens. Four areas undergird this framework: supportive environmental conditions that promote strong relationships and community, productive instructional strategies that foster motivation, self-directed learning, and competence, social and emotional learning that leads to mindsets and habits that encourage academic progress, and systems of support that allow healthy development while responding to student needs and removing barriers to learning. These areas all contribute to a child's well-rounded development and are valuable considerations for responsive instructional design.

The knowledge about how people learn, gained through the work of countless researchers over the last several decades, serves to inform the work of educators, as evidenced by common instructional practices, school organization, and policies around testing, curriculum, and discipline. At the same time, we must be willing to integrate new research that challenges old paradigms that intelligence is fixed at birth, that school opportunities are rightfully distributed based on tests that rank children's potential, that learning follows a predictable path and is best realized by the memorization of information, and that punishment is a constructive guide to behavior (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021). The learning demands of individuals shift across time, settings, and context, and involve complicated, dynamic processes (Cantor et al., 2021) that require that teachers be able to adapt and respond to the evolving needs of learners.

Placing Learners' Needs at the Center of Instruction

Success in school is correlated with positive long-term life outcomes (Almlund et al., 2011; Spengler et al., 2015). For some students, barriers to success are largely out of their control. For instance, students living in poverty are less likely to complete high school than their more affluent peers, and students who are unable to complete high school are, on average, less likely to be employed, more likely to receive public assistance, and more likely to be arrested (Lowder et al., 2022). To address such concerns, schools across the country have made attempts to provide curricular programs which reduce inequities in reading and math achievement and that lead to improved student outcomes (Milner, 2013). Many school leaders believe that fidelity to commercial programs is the preferred path to success for students, relying on adherence to scripted curricula to level the playing field for all students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Vaughn et al., 2022). While teachers navigate through numerous decisions each day (Blackley et al., 2021), scripted commercial programs are specifically crafted to alleviate a portion of those instructional choices. Despite the adoption of such programs, many students are failing to reach expected proficiency levels, leading to ever-increasing criticism of teachers and schools (Pianta et al., 2007). Teachers often do not have the autonomy to use their professional judgment in designing instruction that best matches the daily needs of their struggling learners (Dresser, 2012; Griffith, 2008; Matteucci et al., 2017; Milner, 2013).

Despite the proliferation of scripted commercial programs, by traditional measures, many students are failing to achieve success (Pianta et al., 2007). Among educational researchers, debate has raged whether instructional emphasis should be placed on children's cognitive and academic development, or on their physical, social, and emotional needs - when science now tells us that the answer is both (Shelton, 2021). Learning and growth for children "does not occur

in a vacuum, but instead at the messy, vibrant intersection of academic, social, and emotional development, helped (or hindered) by the quality of students' relationships and the contexts in which they live and learn" (Shelton, 2021, Foreword II). Commercial curriculum programs, rather than addressing the specific lived experiences of subsets of students, tend to generalize and standardize their approach, which may serve to ignore or even erase students' particular culture (Waller & Barrentine, 2015).

The current educational system and the constraints built into federal law (e.g., requiring high-stakes assessments in reading and math) do not support robust implementation, let alone integration, of these practices [related to equitable whole-child design]. Nor do they prioritize deep connections across school- and community-based resources. If, however, the purpose of education is the equitable, holistic development of each student, scientific knowledge from diverse fields and sources can be used to redesign policies and practices to create settings that unleash the potential in each student. (Cantor, 2021, p. 23)

Cantor calls us to examine and change current practices and policies in schools that do not contribute to, and may in fact hinder, equitable opportunities for all children. She challenges policymakers, school leaders, and teachers to develop and implement structures and strategies that are empowering and personalized for each child.

Leadership Practices Related to Instruction

The established fact that many children are failing to thrive within the existing structures and practices of schools (Dresser, 2012; Pianta et al., 2007; The Nation's Report Card, n.d.; Vaughn et al., 2022) highlights the need for educational leaders to consider how or if commercial programs meet the needs of all students. One impetus for the proliferation of scripted commercial educational programs and the mandates around implementation fidelity is the desire

to increase the professionalization of the education field in light of years of criticism (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). However, large-scale standardization of instruction brings to mind Morgan's (2006) machine metaphor of organizations, which separates the planning of design of work—in this case, instructional planning, which is done by authors far removed from the classroom—and implementation of the work—in this case, classroom instruction.

Commercial instructional programs may not lead to increased teacher professionalism. Such manual-based programs may impede teacher professionalism through the routinization of instruction, leaving less room for professional judgment and demonstration of teacher autonomy and agency (Bartholdsson, 2021). Some teachers may be unaware that they have taken on the role of a passive technician rather than an active professional in their students' instructional decisions. In fact, some “even support the idea that governments and other authorities can provide them with the standardized materials and sources, and they can use them without any adaptation to students' interests, needs and their individual differences” (Toraman & Korkmaz, 2022, p. 500). Teachers who attempt to flex their professional judgment in designing a more personalized approach to their instructional practices may be discouraged and branded as difficult, leading to them to feel apathetic in the face of challenges that they may understand but feel powerless to address within the structure of their organization (Morgan, 2006). To counter these tendencies, school leaders may enhance equity within their institutions by facilitating teachers in complementing or fine-tuning the established curriculum program (Leithwood, 2021). Such adjustment can help to leverage the assets present in families, communities, and students, leading to more equitable opportunities for diverse groups of students (Cantor, 2021; Cantor et al., 2021).

Teaching is a stressful career (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Ferguson et al., 2017), and the inclination of educational leaders may be to alleviate some stress by contracting out instructional design and decision-making to large publishing companies (Connell, 2013; Stacy et al., 2023). Commercial programs provide pre-packaged curricular materials and uniform approaches, ostensibly reducing the time and effort required for instructional planning. In the short term, this may make teachers' lives easier, but the priority must be on student learning. To truly improve schools and student outcomes, educational leaders would do well to abide by a three-dimensional framework including collaboratively approved principles of teaching and learning, a democratic process by which school stakeholders hold power in educational decision-making, and a process by which the school community practices self-reflection to evolve and improve learning outcomes (Glickman & Mette, 2020).

Moving Beyond Scripted Practices

Scripted commercial programs accompanied by strict pacing schedules are ubiquitous in schools today. Curriculum materials play an important role in the scope, sequence, and other aspects of instruction (Crawford & Snider, 2000). The What Works Clearinghouse, a remnant of NCLB (Brass & Holloway, 2021), serves as a repository of high-quality, evidence-based curriculum resources for schools. However, even with evidence-based instructional programs, scores of students continue to struggle (Dresser, 2012; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022; Pianta et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2022). Scripted curriculum resources may provide a basic structure for instruction, but the teacher must attend to the individual needs of students and respond appropriately.

Teacher autonomy is a contributing factor in positive teacher morale and job satisfaction (Salokangas et al., 2020). Findings from this study will inform instructional practices that merge

scripted curriculum resources with responsive instructional practices. Responsive teaching supports teachers in exercising professional judgment to optimize outcomes for all students, leading to increased teacher autonomy, morale, and job satisfaction.

In this chapter, I synthesized current literature as it relates to accountability mandates in schools and subsequent moves toward prescriptive practices. I reviewed research concerning learning theories and examined practices concerning the fidelity of implementation of scripted commercial programs. I explored how these practices impact responsive teaching and teachers' capacity to address individual student needs. I also considered leadership practices that play a crucial role in supporting responsive instructional paradigms within the educational setting. In the next chapter, I will detail the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques employed to address the research questions and achieve the study's objectives.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

In this study, I used a qualitative interview approach from a critical perspective to investigate the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of exemplary K-8 teachers relative to mandates around fidelity of implementation of commercial reading and math programs. Qualitative research is called for when existing theory does not adequately explain the complexity of the issue and when that qualitative research highlights exploration of the issue from the perspectives of research participants (Tomita et al., 2021).

I took an interpretivist stance to understand the actions and interactions of exemplary teachers regarding the presence or absence of fidelity mandates in their school settings. An interpretivist perspective explores others' perceptions of phenomena, in this case the phenomenon of fidelity mandates as they impact teacher agency and instructional decision-making, and then analyzes and interprets participants' intentions and actions (Glesne, 2016). This approach allowed me to explore teachers' perceptions, intentions, and actions regarding fidelity mandates, recognizing that these phenomena are inherently shaped by individual perspectives and experiences. Instead of imposing preconceived frameworks, the interpretivist perspective enabled a deep understanding of the unique ways in which teachers navigate and respond to the presence or absence of fidelity mandates in their professional lives. Through this interpretive lens, I aimed to uncover the underlying meanings, motivations, and implications of teachers' actions and interactions in the context of fidelity mandates, contributing to a more holistic understanding of their experiences.

I also employed a pragmatic paradigm. Constructive knowledge that not only enhances theoretical understanding but also directly informs practical decision-making and actions is an essential feature of pragmatism (Goldkuhl, 2012). A pragmatic paradigm is particularly apt for

studies in education, where the impact of research extends beyond academia to influence real-world practices. The goal of this study is to generate understanding that will help inform field educators as they design instructional practices. Additionally, through this study I hope to provide valuable guidance for educational leaders regarding policy creation and professional development design related to implementation of commercial programs. By grounding the research in pragmatism, I intend for this research to be more than an intellectual exercise. My purpose with this study is to offer actionable insights to help address the practical challenges faced by educators and educational leaders in the dynamic landscape of K-8 education.

Data Collection

My initial research goal was to interview 10-12 exemplary teachers, chosen through purposeful sampling. Exemplary teachers achieve positive student outcomes consistently through their teaching strategies, regardless of external factors (Allington, 2002). Through my research, I aimed to identify and document these best practices, with the goal of sharing and replicating them in diverse educational settings. In my experience, exemplary teachers bring a unique perspective on responsive teaching practices from a conceptual level because they deeply understand the foundational principles of teaching and learning. This conceptual understanding allows them to adapt and innovate in their instruction, responding to students' needs in ways that align with best practices and research-backed methodologies. They have likely wrestled extensively with sensemaking in ways that reconcile fidelity mandates with responsive instruction. Exemplary teachers often exert influence on the instructional practices of their colleagues by inspiring change, sharing strategies and resources, collaborating, advocating for continual improvement, and providing individual support to peers (Cassata & Allensworth, 2021).

In selecting exemplary teachers as research participants, I was able to control for potential confounding variables that may affect research outcomes. These teachers often share a specific set of qualifications which may include advanced degrees, extensive teaching experience, and a history of high student achievement. By focusing on this group in my research, I was able to attribute outcomes more confidently to factors such as teaching practices and instructional strategies rather than external variables such as classroom management issues.

A challenge is that exemplary is in the eye of the beholder, and what is considered exemplary may change according to context (Berliner, 2001). To help ensure that objective measures were used to identify exemplary teachers, potential participants were recognized as exemplary by virtue of their identification as Maine County Teacher of the Year awardees. The utilization of purposeful sampling in this way provided me with information-rich settings and examples which were expected to reveal issues of primary importance relevant to the research (Patton, 2002).

I began contacting the most recent (2023) recipients of Maine County Teacher of the Year awards, reaching back to previous years as needed. I communicated initially with one prospective research participant from each of Maine's 16 counties. For each county, I identified the most recent Maine County Teacher of the Year awardee who met the research criteria: K-8 general education teachers who teach English Language Arts (ELA) or mathematics. Several Maine County Teachers of the Year did not meet these criteria, while others either declined to participate or to respond to numerous requests. I sent a minimum of two additional emails to each participant before moving to another, earlier awardee from that county. Ultimately, I was able to recruit participants from 11 of 16 counties, representing County Teachers of the Year from 2016 to 2023.

I conducted semi-structured interviews (Appendix F) via Zoom which were recorded to capture both audio and video data. Using a semi-structured interview format, I was able to follow up and probe deeper into participant's responses in order to create a profile of exemplary practices which integrate the use of commercial programs with responsive teaching that acknowledges and honors the diverse lived experiences and needs of all learners.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of Zoom interviews were uploaded to Sonix (<https://sonix.ai/>) for transcription efficiency. I reviewed transcripts for accuracy and sent them to each respective participant to review for accuracy, clarity, and intent. Transcriptions were uploaded to Delve (<https://delvetool.com/>) for coding efficiency. I used deductive and inductive coding to analyze the interview transcripts. Deductive coding (Saldaña, 2016) involved themes that manifested themselves in responses. Such themes included formative assessment, communication of expectations around fidelity, and teacher agency. I utilized inductive coding as well, looking for possibilities of emergent themes that I identified during data collection and analysis.

I started generating codes as I progressed through interviews rather than wait until all fieldwork had been completed, employing line-by-line coding to uncover concepts. I used the elemental structural coding method described by Saldaña (2016) throughout this round. Through structural coding, content-based or conceptual phrases were assigned to a segment of data, which helped reveal major topics or themes. In addition, I used domain coding (Glesne, 2016) to discover how participants categorized aspects of instruction related to fidelity of implementation of commercial programs. First round coding results were organized into a table so that commonalities among responses could be explored. I used focused coding during the second cycle to explore codes based on conceptual similarity. This process allowed me to discover the

main categories and themes generated during the interview process (Saldaña, 2016). Such themes included *Exemplary Educator Orientation Toward Work: Integrity of Implementation* and *Addressing the Diverse Needs of Students Through Responsive Teaching*.

Throughout the coding process, I analyzed the data and compared emergent themes that were consistent refrains in the responses of research participants. Findings from this study will contribute to the body of research that shapes leadership and instructional practices in schools. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers may apply these findings to their practice, allowing them to better address the diverse needs of students so that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Validity/Trustworthiness

Possible threats to validity in this research project include a relatively small sample size. To ensure that the results are transferable, I surveyed and interviewed participants that represent varying demographic groups, including district and school size, rurality, and orientation of leadership toward fidelity of implementation of district-adopted reading programs. Participants were identified through purposive sampling and were identified as highly effective teachers as a result of their selection as Maine County Teachers of the Year within the past decade.

Using a semi-structured interview format allowed me to clarify responses from this group. In formulating initial and follow-up questions, I used several strategies to ensure reliability and validity (Glesne, 2016), including pilot testing semi-structured interview questions with a small sample of teachers in elementary settings. I guarded against using leading questions which might introduce my own possible biases in the interview process, keeping questions neutral and objective. I utilized follow-up questions to delve deeper into specific areas and ensure a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perspectives. I took care to approach each

interview with an open mind and avoid making assumptions about the interviewees or their experiences. This helped avoid confirmation bias and ensure a more objective analysis. I conducted member checking by sharing interview transcripts, along with my own analytical notes, with each participant in order to obtain their feedback and clarification of my interpretations. Several research participants provided artifacts from their Teacher of the Year applicants which supported and extended their views expressed in interviews. Finally, extensive peer review was obtained to provide external reflection of my research methods and analysis. Along each phase of research and writing, feedback was gathered from various members of my doctoral cohort as well as from instructors.

Limitations

Possible limitations to this research project include the relatively small number of research participants. To help mitigate this, participants were chosen from a wide variety of locations within Maine and represent districts and schools with a range of practices regarding fidelity of implementation of commercial curricular resources.

The research sample may be an additional limitation, as the identification of teachers as exemplary can be based on subjective measures. The use of teachers who have been recognized as Maine County Teachers of the Year helped provide a standardized and externally validated criterion for classifying individuals as exemplary. Artifacts from teachers, including Teacher of the Year application essays, videos, and reference letters, confirmed that research participants exhibited exemplary skills as educators. Selection as County Teachers of the Year ensure that educators are experts in their field who are committed to delivering effective instruction for all students.

As a qualitative researcher, I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Ochieng, 2009). The inductive nature of qualitative research required that as I interpreted data and developed abstractions, it was incumbent upon me to continually guard against my own possible biases through frequent consultation with peers that represent a broad range of educational perspectives. Having taught for almost 30 years before entering an administrative role, my positionality is shaped by a deep commitment to student-centered pedagogy and a belief in the value of personalized learning experiences. Grounded in ongoing reflection and a commitment to proactively seeking new resources as necessary, my approach prioritized flexibility, adaptability, and meeting the diverse needs of all learners. Additionally, my positionality is informed by a recognition of the systemic inequities present in education and a dedication to fostering inclusive and equitable classroom environments where every student can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Care was taken to thoughtfully consider findings that did not necessarily align with any preconceived notions I may have had, so that a broader, more objective understanding of the phenomenon of instructional decision-making relative to the use of commercial programs could be attained.

Ethical Obligations

Ethical issues of varying measure are inherent possibilities in research that involves human subjects (Saldaña, 2016). Detailed research notes were kept to help flag and address potential incidents that were contraindicated in ethical research practices. For instance, as a long-time educator in Maine who has worked with several state and national groups, it was possible that I may have personally known some teachers who have been recipients of the Maine County Teacher of the Year award. I avoided the inclusion of participants with whom I have a personal

relationship, to steer clear of the appearance of a conflict of interest or introduction of unnecessary bias into my research.

Prospective interview participants received an emailed invitation to participate in the study. The email explained the purpose of the study, including the research questions. Email addresses were not shared with anyone, and reports include no identifying factors other than the fact that respondents are teachers in Maine who have been identified as Maine County Teachers of the Year. All interview participants could choose to end their participation in interviews at any time, decline to answer any individual questions, or request that something be kept off the record.

Maine County Teachers of the Year represent a small subset of all teachers, which realistically increases participants' risk of identification. However, individual responses were de-identified before data analysis to help ensure confidentiality. Additionally, all participants were aware that research participants would be identified as Maine County Teachers of the Year in the research report. Member checking was utilized as I shared the transcription of the interview along with analytic notes with each participant to verify that the intent of their responses was represented accurately in each instance. Interview results were reported in such a way as to protect the anonymity of all subjects. Recordings of interviews will be destroyed upon successful defense of the dissertation study and report. In total, these measures help to ensure that research has been conducted in a way that meets all ethical standards.

Securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Maine plays a vital role in safeguarding the welfare and rights of research participants by scrutinizing the ethical dimensions of the proposed study. The process involved the submission of a comprehensive research protocol, detailing the study's objectives, methodologies, and participant

safeguards. The IRB's thorough evaluation, guided by ethical considerations, ensures that the research adheres to established standards and respects the rights and well-being of participants involved. IRB approval serves as a testament to the study's credibility and adherence to principles of responsible research.

In this chapter, I provided a comprehensive overview of the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques employed in this doctoral dissertation. Utilizing a qualitative interview methodology informed by a critical perspective and using deductive and inductive coding to analyze results, this study explored the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of exemplary K-8 teachers regarding the implementation mandates of commercial reading and math programs. This research will help inform effective teaching and leadership practices around the implementation of commercial scripted K-8 programs in reading and mathematics. Through attention to ethical considerations and accepted research methods, this study endeavors to produce credible and trustworthy results that advance knowledge in the field. In the subsequent chapters, the findings of the study will be presented and discussed in detail, providing a deeper understanding of the research topic and its implications for theory, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways that exemplary teachers interpret fidelity mandates related to commercial scripted educational programs and the impact that such mandates have on teacher perceptions of agency in the classroom. Further, this study explored and sought to define the leadership practices around fidelity mandates that lead to responsive teaching methods. The research questions which provided the focus for this work were:

- 1) What stance do exemplary teachers take toward district mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of district-adopted commercial programs in reading and mathematics?
- 2) What leadership attitudes and practices around implementation fidelity and professional developmental opportunities contribute to responsive teaching practices?

In this chapter I will describe the research participant sample, including the demographics and characteristics relevant to the study. I will describe the data collection process as well as the process used to analyze and code the transcripts generated. I will itemize codes used for initial analysis and describe the process used to group codes into broader themes. Included in the chapter are tables that present detailed code and theme data, as well as examples and quotes from individual interviews used to illustrate key findings.

Setting

According to the 2020 United States census, Maine is inhabited by approximately 1.4 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The state's population density is 41.3 people per square mile, making it the least densely populated state east of the Mississippi River. As of 2010, Maine was also the most rural state in the Union, with only 38.7% of the state's population living within urban areas. There are 16 counties in Maine, with over 40% of Maine's population located in the southernmost two counties of the state. Over 94% percent of the population is

White. Several communities, particularly those in denser population areas, have seen large numbers of immigrants, many of whom are non-English speaking, prompting schools to adjust services to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse students. The school structure in Maine is one of local control, with schools organized by single or multiple municipalities. All school administrative units are governed by state law and guided by the Maine Department of Education (MDOE). The MDOE administers state education subsidies as well as state and federal grant programs, interprets rules for education statutes passed by the Maine State Legislature, oversees educator credentialing, and provides optional professional development, information, supports, and resources to schools. Decisions around local governance, spending priorities, and curricular decisions rest with individual school administrative units.

Recruitment emails for this study were sent to Maine County Teachers of the Year from each of the 16 Maine counties. Ultimately, I was able to identify research participants from 11 of 16 (69%) counties. The work settings of research participants represented each of the four locale classification types (City, Suburban, Town, and Rural) of the NCES framework (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The most rural setting among the research participants was Rural: Distant (42). This subtype is defined as territory between more than five and less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. The least rural setting among research participants was City: Small (13). This category refers to territory within an urbanized area and within a principal city with a population less than 100,000 according to the U.S. census. Although local conditions can vary widely from school to school and district to district, this research sought to identify commonalities among the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of

exemplary K-8 teachers from various settings regarding the implementation mandates of commercial reading and math programs.

Experience of the research participants ranged from eight years in education to 40 years in education, with nine participants (82%) having served at least 20 years in education. The mean number of years of experience in education among all participants was 25.6. Of the 11 participants, one was male, and the rest were female. Eight of the educators worked with elementary (K-5) populations, and the remaining three served middle school student populations (Grades 6 through 8) at the time that they received the Maine County Teacher of the Year award. Three participants have moved into administrative or coaching roles since the time of their award years. However, they were able to speak to the research questions through their lens as a teacher.

Data Collection

Interviews with each of the 11 research participants represented the primary source of data for this study. In addition, six research participants shared materials from their Teacher of the Year application packets that they judged to be relevant to this study. I used a semi-structured interview format which allowed for individual follow up questions based on responses. The duration of interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 80 minutes. Participants received a copy of the core questions prior to their interview. Most interviews were conducted online via Zoom for convenience of all parties. One interview was conducted in person because of repeated technical difficulties involving that participant. Audio and video were recorded for all Zoom interviews, while only audio was recorded for the in-person interview. Audio recordings were uploaded to Sonix (<https://sonix.ai/>), an online transcription service. I reviewed and edited each transcribed interview for accuracy. I then emailed the revised transcript to each respective participant to ensure that the transcribed messages matched their recollection and intent.

Data Analysis

Transcriptions were uploaded to Delve (<https://delvetool.com/>), a third-party coding service. First-round coding is an essential step in the qualitative research process and involves systematically organizing and categorizing data to identify preliminary patterns, themes, or concepts (Glesne, 2016). I used deductive and inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016) to analyze the interview transcripts. I began deductive coding with a provisional list of codes aligned with the study's conceptual framework and research questions. Such codes included formative assessment, communication of expectations around fidelity, and teacher agency. Inductive codes emerged from examination of participant responses and included integrity of implementation, art of teaching, and lack of curriculum.

I employed second round pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016) to group existing codes into broader categories or themes to represent findings. Second-round coding is a methodological approach employed in qualitative research to deepen the analysis and refine the coding structure after the initial coding phase. This iterative process involves revisiting the coded data to identify emerging patterns, themes, or relationships that may not have been apparent during the first round of coding. Pattern codes are explanatory codes that “identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). Upon analysis of transcripts, several initial codes contributed to common conceptual themes (Table 1).

The conceptual themes of Exemplary Educator Mindset and Orientation Toward Work with Students Leading to Alternate Interpretations of Fidelity: Integrity of Implementation, Strengths and Challenges of Scripted Programs, and Addressing the Diverse Needs of Students Through Responsive Teaching, primarily address the first research question. The conceptual

Table 1*Conceptual Themes*

Conceptual Theme	Initial Codes Included
Exemplary Educator Orientation Toward Work: Integrity of Implementation	Integrity of Implementation Data-Driven Decisions Curriculum Targets vs Program Targets Common Assessments Focus on Student Growth Formative Assessment Reteaching/Filling Gaps Response to Intervention Focus on Standards Not Script Modification/Adaptations to Scripted Programs Art of Teaching Teacher-Created Lessons Sense of Personal Responsibility Teacher Agency Teacher Feelings Around Fidelity
Strengths and Challenges of Scripted Programs	Sustainability of Programs Interconnected Curriculum Misperceptions of Strengths of Scripted Programs Strengths of Scripted Programs
Addressing the Diverse Needs of Students Through Responsive Teaching	Diverse Needs of Students COVID Professional Judgment Responsive Teaching
Implications for Leadership Practices	Lack of Curriculum Leadership Practices Building vs District Practices Consistency Implementing New Programs Communication of Expectations Professional Development Instructional Coaches Inconsistent Messaging/Expectations Around Fidelity Admin-Driven Curriculum Decisions Teacher-Driven Curriculum Decisions Accountability: No One's Watching

theme of Implications for Leadership Practices speaks to the second research question. These conceptual themes will be discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter.

For triangulation purposes, I examined Teacher of the Year application materials submitted by six (55%) research participants. The remaining five participants were unable to locate their application materials or did not feel their materials were relevant to this research. Materials submitted included lesson plans, personal essays, videos, and letters of reference. All materials aligned with the views presented during interviews by each respective participant, and some materials provided greater insight and details that are included in the findings that follow.

Findings

Research Question 1: What is the stance that exemplary teachers take toward district mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of district-adopted commercial programs in reading and mathematics?

Strengths and Challenges of Scripted Programs

Benefits of Scripted Programs

Research participants reported that there are several benefits of commercial scripted curricular programs. Reported benefits include the provision of a framework for instruction, an appropriate grade level instructional scope and sequence, and reduction in the time and energy that teachers must commit to lesson design and preparation.

Interviewed teachers reported that commercial programs can provide a consistent approach to instruction across all classrooms in a grade level, building, or district, which may help ensure that all students receive uniform content and learning experiences and reduce educational disparities. One interviewee stated, “Total freedom is the enemy of all art. You need a framework.” This quote underscores the notion that constraints or guidelines can actually

enhance creativity and effectiveness. A structured framework for instruction can give teachers space to bring their own artistry to their instruction while ensuring that core learning objectives are in place. Commercial programs can also ensure that grading practices are consistent across educators because all students are evaluated based on consistent criteria and expectations.

Research participants reported that commercial programs are generally designed to align with state and national standards, helping schools meet state and national accountability measures. They are commonly developed by large companies with access to research regarding research-based best practices and can provide a clear scope and sequence and hierarchy of instructional focus. One teacher who began their career in a district that did not have an articulated local curriculum emphasized,

As a first-year teacher trying to make decisions that are backed by research, about what to teach my kids, the scope and sequence, developing that all on my own was really, really challenging. . . There are definitely some things that I did due to lack of preparation or lack of resources that, you know, weren't best for kids. . . So when we adopted a program, it gave me a way to have a more cohesive scope and sequence about what I'm going to be teaching.

This teacher was reflecting on the challenges faced by new teachers in developing comprehensive instructional plans independently, often resulting in gaps or inconsistencies in student learning experiences. Adopting commercial scripted programs provides these teachers with a structured framework and pre-designed scope and sequence, alleviating the burden of curriculum development and ensuring a more cohesive and consistent approach to instruction.

Interviewees reported that commercial programs may save teachers some time in terms of planning and resource allocation, and can serve as a scaffold for professional growth, particularly

for new teachers. As one teacher noted, “If you’re a brand-new teacher, a script is super helpful to help you build your confidence and your capacity.” Another teacher stated,

I think there’s some comfort in the idea of providing a commercial program so that new teachers or early career teachers have something to lean on that is created by a reputable source and that they’re not creating from the ground up.

This statement highlights the value of commercial scripted programs as a resource for new or early career teachers, offering a sense of security and guidance derived from established, reputable sources. By providing a structured framework developed by experts, these programs offer a supportive foundation for educators navigating the complexities of classroom instruction, particularly in their initial years of teaching.

Challenges of Scripted Programs

Teachers in this study expressed the belief that some of the perceived benefits of scripted programs can also pose challenges to responsive teaching practices. While exemplary teachers in this study agree that commercial programs can provide benefits to schools, these same teachers warned against over-reliance on any one program. One teacher said,

There were hundreds of times that my lesson plans [provided by the commercial program] never could have gotten us to the place where our discussions did about books [that I supplemented with] and about reading and writing [practices that I scaffolded for them].

This quote illustrates the limitations of relying solely on commercial scripted programs, as the provided lesson plans may not adequately facilitate deep and meaningful discussions or address the individualized needs of students. By supplementing the scripted materials with additional resources and scaffolding techniques, this teacher was able to enhance student

engagement and foster richer learning experiences that went beyond the scope of the prescribed program.

Research participants reported that there can be an illusion that a scripted program completely takes the planning piece out for teachers. One research participant pointed out, “In this age of problems with teacher retention, there’s sort of a façade that having those pre-prepared scripts and lessons means that [an effective] teacher is going to do less work to get ready.” Research participants explicitly warned against the tendency among some teachers to rely on a commercial program to walk in, open the book, read the script, and be done. As another teacher said, “You have to change every year with every group of kids, for crying out loud. And these programs do not allow for that.” Yet another teacher stated,

The script is the guideline. That’s the starting place that some corporate put together from whatever was given to them as the design parameters. But if you’re not in that classroom with those kids and their specific experience, you can’t know what they need.

These teachers asserted that while commercial scripted programs provide a guideline, they may not fully account for the unique needs and experiences of individual students in the classroom. Developed by external entities, these programs may lack the nuanced understanding of students' diverse backgrounds and learning styles, limiting their effectiveness in meeting the specific needs of each classroom and student population. This highlights the importance of educators' expertise and contextual knowledge in adapting scripted materials to best serve the needs of their students.

A presumed benefit of scripted programs is that they level the playing field for all students by providing standardized instruction, yet students come with a wide range of experiences and skills. One interviewee said, “The script is the guideline...But if you’re not in

that classroom with those kids and their specific experience, you can't know what they need."

What works for some or even most students may not work for all, leaving some students without access to the opportunity to learn. Another stated,

The people that developed that program [trained us] to do it with fidelity. . . And, you know, kiddos in central Maine are not the same as children in southern Maine, are not the same as children in upstate New York. And yet this program was devised [for all of them]. It drives me crazy.

This quote spotlights the frustration that arises when scripted commercial programs are designed with a one-size-fits-all approach, lacking flexibility to accommodate the diverse needs and contexts of students across different settings. Despite efforts to train educators to implement these programs with fidelity, the rigidity of the scripted content may overlook the unique characteristics and backgrounds of students, hindering effective teaching and learning experiences.

Not only do students come with a wide range of experiences and skills, the same is true of teachers. Despite even strict fidelity mandates, the instruction in each classroom is going to look and feel different, because the way each teacher interprets and delivers the same lesson inevitably incorporates their own unique style and skillset. As one teacher related,

For me, I sing and dance and I go up to kids and I'm, like, doing things. And the text was the same and the target was the same and the topic was the same. But the way the teacher was delivering and interpreting that lesson was their own unique style.

Another teacher said,

There's a perception that a strength of commercial programs is consistency. I think there's sort of a suggested idea that by adopting curriculum, commercial programs, that

you're going to have more consistent instruction from classroom to classroom and school to school. Sometimes I wonder to myself why we hold strongly to that idea when we know that there are so many other factors involved in a teacher's instruction and the choices they make day to day [that]to think it means consistency is kind of funny.

Another interviewee related,

I know for a fact that if you looked at the same [commercial program] lesson taught in my classroom and the classroom next door to me, you wouldn't see the same instruction. And that's a combination of things. It's a combination of my years of experience, right? There are a lot of factors that play in, my classroom management, my sense for when kids have something or don't have something and being able to move on. The actual students in front of me make a difference in what I'm doing and whether I create a scaffold or I'm just going with strictly what's there. My decision about whether that lesson needs to bridge more than one day or is done on that day. . . All of those decisions are on the spot decisions.

These quotes underscore the inherent variability in instruction even when using the same commercial program, as teachers' individual knowledge and skills influence their instructional decisions. The varied skill set of each teacher, along with the unique characteristics of each group of students, lead to on-the-spot adjustments in teaching methods, such as providing additional scaffolding or extending lessons across multiple days. This highlights the importance of recognizing teachers' expertise and adaptability in responsive teaching practices that meet the specific needs of their students, even within the framework of commercial scripted programs.

An over-reliance on scripted programs can lead to teachers feeling constrained by mandates that do not consider their own professional judgment and expertise, leaving them

feeling disillusioned, ineffective, and, as one teacher put it, “stifled.” Another teacher referenced this feeling of being stifled when she said,

I can’t be a cheerleader and do my cheers, you know, because that’s not in the script.

[New teachers] can figure out how to make it their own after a few years of doing it. But it’s not for someone who likes to connect with their kids.

This teacher suggests that adherence to commercial scripted programs can restrict teachers' ability to authentically engage with their students and develop meaningful connections in the classroom. As such, while scripted programs offer structure and guidance, they may not align with the teaching styles or preferences of educators who prioritize building relationships and individualized instruction.

Exemplary Educator Orientation Toward Work

Integrity of Implementation

Teachers who participated in this study expressed a commitment to integrity of implementation, which they defined as remaining aligned to established learning outcomes, over fidelity of implementation that requires strict adherence to program resources and scripts. Research participants presented various interpretations of implementation fidelity, or the degree to which an instructional program or intervention is implemented compared with the initial program design (Hill & Erickson, 2019). Regardless of district expectations of program fidelity, participants suggested that they tend to focus less on scripts and pacing schedules and more on the specific needs of their students in meeting intended outcomes. One teacher stated,

A lot of high quality educators not only yearn for that autonomy, but they can ground themselves in their integrity and they can say, listen, I am going to be up at night making sure my standards are aligned and making sure my instructional practices are grounded in

best practice and routine...In my opinion, an exemplary teacher does not feel bound by the rigidity of [a program]. However, they also feel compelled by their own personal integrity to ensure when they're stepping outside of [the script], that they are doing so integrously and they are anchored to standards, they are anchored to best practice, and they are anchored to student outcomes.

This teacher was highlighting the importance of agency for high-quality educators, who prioritize aligning their instructional practices with standards and best practices. The teacher opined that while exemplary teachers may deviate from scripted programs to meet the diverse needs of their students, they do so with a commitment to integrity and accountability, ensuring that their decisions are grounded in standards, best practices, and student outcomes. The teacher's response suggests that exemplary teachers are not inclined to modify expectations in a manner that compromises the rigor of the learning targets. This emphasizes the complex balance between autonomy and fidelity to scripted commercial programs, as teachers navigate and try to make sense of the tension between adhering to prescribed content and making pedagogical decisions that best serve their students.

While all participants indicated that they could see some value in commercial curricular programs, they also qualified their responses to allow for teacher judgment and professionalism in making instructional decisions. As one teacher asserted,

When you hire a teacher, you say to them, we believe you are a fit for our school, we believe you're professional enough. We mean all of these things that celebrate a professional career as a teacher. They would never say to a doctor, no, you're going to cut this person open to the left, not to the right, because that's the new way we're doing

it. Not if he's a great surgeon and he's been cutting to the left his whole life. No other career does this.

This teacher expressed being discouraged by the unique challenges faced by teachers in navigating scripted commercial programs, which may impose rigid constraints on instructional autonomy and decision-making. Unlike other professions where expertise and individual judgment are valued, teachers may feel disempowered by mandates that dictate specific teaching methods, undermining their professional autonomy and ability to tailor instruction to meet the needs of their students. This teacher stressed the importance of recognizing and respecting teachers' expertise and professional judgment in implementing scripted programs effectively while maintaining flexibility to adapt to the unique contexts of their classrooms.

All participants in this study emphasized the importance of a flexible mindset when approaching implementation of any instructional program, holding the consideration that any program will inevitably have gaps that do not meet the needs of the particular children sitting in front of them from one year to the next. As one teacher said, "I prefer to use the word integrity [rather than fidelity] because it allows the teachers to understand [the importance of] integrity to the content, but they still have opportunity to bring their art and craft [to their instruction]." As this teacher worked to make sense of fidelity mandates, they emphasized the value of integrity over fidelity in instructional practices within commercial scripted programs, providing teachers with the flexibility to infuse their expertise and creativity into their teaching while maintaining alignment with content standards. By prioritizing integrity, educators represented by this study have upheld the core principles of their curricular programs while tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs and learning styles of their students, fostering a more authentic and engaging learning experience within the framework of scripted programs.

Personal Integrity

Research participants described having a highly ingrained sense of personal responsibility in helping children reach learning targets. Rather than wait for permission from an external source to flex commercial program components and instruction, these teachers tend to follow their own personal mandate to deliver what students need to meet district and program goals.

One teacher summed up the feelings of other Maine County Teachers of the Year:

When I consider fidelity mandates, be it reading, be it math, I don't do so in a vacuum.

And what is always on the forefront of my mind right next to those fidelity considerations is my personal integrity as a high-quality educator. And first and foremost, my job as an educator is to ensure that every single one of my students meets or exceeds their potential.

This teacher refused to let constraints of a commercial program overshadow their own responsibility to meet the individual needs of each student and ensure their students' academic growth and achievement. This educator was able to reconcile and make sense of fidelity mandates by maintaining a focus on student-centered instruction and holistic development.

Research participants advocated for a balanced approach to instruction that utilizes commercial programs as resources while preserving teacher autonomy and adaptability to help ensure that the unique needs of students are met effectively. One research participant spoke to this balanced approach:

Fidelity can take on different forms. . . You've got this ladder of academics, right? And you've got kids that are on the lowest rung and they need hand-holding to move up every single rung. You've got kids in the middle of that ladder who are doing fine and don't need much direction. And then you've got your kids who are climbing off the ladder of

your grade level and onto the next one. And our job is to make sure that no matter which rung they're on, they're going to meet their expectations. And then there isn't just that one ladder, right? There's also the content of character. You know who they are as a student and how they engage with your academics. And then there's the social emotional ladder. And for any student to be making progress along all three of those ladders, all three of those ladders have to be in lock step. And so when I'm thinking about fidelity mandates, I'm also thinking about my integrity mandate to myself. And when I think about it that way, a scope and sequence and a be on this unit by this day starts to take a back seat to ensuring that every single one of my students on all of those rungs has an equitable shot at meeting that long-term goal that unit is covering. . . So instead of moving on to the next lesson the next day, I sit down and look at where those challenges were and where things went wrong, and I approach it differently the next day.

This teacher's words demonstrated a commitment to holistic student development, personalized learning approaches, and a nuanced understanding of diverse learning needs. In the realm of fidelity, this orientation challenges conventional interpretations that may prioritize strict adherence to predetermined instructional protocols and resources. Instead, it promotes a view where fidelity is not solely measured by rigid adherence but also by the effectiveness of instructional strategies in meeting the unique needs of each student. This alternate interpretation recognizes that an exemplary educator's fidelity lies in the authentic responsiveness to individual student requirements, adapting and tailoring instructional methods while staying true to the overarching educational objectives and to the personal sense of responsibility that the educator feels.

Addressing the Diverse Needs of Students Through Responsive Teaching

Knowing Students

Many different areas of Maine were represented in this study by the research participants, from very rural schools to schools in more densely populated areas, from schools with high rates of poverty to schools located in relatively affluent communities. Yet all interviewees reported their belief in the importance of addressing the diverse needs of their students and honoring their collective and individual identities. When considering commercial programs, one participant said, “They’re not always equitable for, say, rural kids, urban kids, disadvantaged kids, kids learning to speak English, kids from generational poverty.” This teacher noted the inequities inherent in commercial scripted programs, which may not effectively address the diverse needs of students from various backgrounds and contexts. Instead, these programs may overlook the unique challenges faced by rural, urban, disadvantaged, English language learners, and students from impoverished backgrounds, potentially exacerbating educational disparities and limiting opportunities for equitable learning outcomes. This underscores the importance of considering the diverse needs of students and communities when implementing scripted programs, and the necessity of incorporating flexibility and responsiveness into curriculum planning to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for all students. Teachers in this study view a core curriculum as a way to provide equity and access to rigorous and high-quality materials for all students. If materials from a commercial curricular resource are not relevant or accessible to all students, that resource is not doing the job it was intended to do.

All research participants cautioned against substituting commercial program directives for professional judgment when making decisions about how to best meet the diverse needs of students. Participants universally noted the importance of adjusting instruction in a way that

facilitates academic progress for each student. One research participant reported that exemplary teachers are guided by “knowing students, knowing content, knowing how to assess and monitor progress and putting all those pieces together.” This points to the multifaceted expertise that exemplary teachers possess, including a deep understanding of students, content, assessment, and instructional strategies. Another interviewee noted, “The script is the guideline that some corporate put together from whatever was given to them as the design parameters. But if you’re not in that classroom with those kids and their specific experience, you can’t know what they need.” This stresses that while scripted programs offer guidance, effective teaching requires educators to synthesize their understanding of students and content to facilitate meaningful learning experiences. A research participant shared,

You're always going to have that other kid that's just not enough. What are you going to do for them? Because you're, it's your core responsibility to not just create all those other activities, but also you've got to have something in your palm, in your hand to give that extra to that extra kid for that love to keep him engaged or keep Timmy up to speed because God forbid he's, he wants to be there. He does. He just doesn't understand. And he more than anybody deserves to be there.

Again, this quote highlights the importance of responsive teaching practices, emphasizing the necessity of addressing the individual needs of students who may require additional support or enrichment to thrive academically. Research participants consistently expressed the feeling that, while commercial scripted programs provide a structured framework for instruction, responsive teaching practices involve tailoring instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students, including those who may need extra assistance or challenges.

Formative Assessment

Research participants pointed to formative data collection as key in shaping instructional decisions. This was the case whether or not district or building-level leadership structured opportunities for collaborative data discussions. Five respondents specifically referenced creating their own data collection systems beyond those included within scripted programs, using the student data on a daily basis to help determine when and how to stray from a program's script and pacing recommendations. One teacher estimated that as much as 80% of her formative assessment practices were driven by her rather than by the commercial program adopted by her district. In referring to those practices, she said, "They may appear to be informal, but I am constantly picking up information about my students and where they are in relation to the goal I have for them and making a decision about what to do." Some formative assessment strategies noted by teacher respondents included note taking, exit slips that require students to record their thinking and understanding in some way, quick questions while lining up or waiting for the bell, embedding math word problems into daily routines outside of typical math instruction time, and individual white board work.

The teachers in this study reported constantly evaluating their learning targets against student performance as demonstrated through formative assessment and using that data to define what happens next with instruction. Those next steps range from building routines into the day that reinforce skills and conceptual understanding, such as quick checks while lining up or waiting for the bell, to completely suspending the scripted program for several weeks to teach foundational prerequisite skills. One teacher shared,

It depends on what the target is and how far off we are, but that piece defines what we do next. So yes, we might have a new lesson, but that doesn't mean that we don't have ten

minutes at the beginning, that we don't review something or the wrap up at the end might have one more question that maybe it wouldn't have had before. . . I mean, there's always a way. And maybe that's the thing I write on my paper for the next day. How many times can I say this vocabulary word? . . . How many times can I make sure that they see or hear this in a real way?

All teachers who spoke to this data-informed approach to instruction emphasized that their formative and summative data show that thoughtfully taking time to reinforce skills while maintaining focus on the ultimate learning targets better serves the needs of all of their students.

Backwards Planning

Exemplary teachers in this study cited backwards planning, or starting instructional planning with the learning target and determining how best to move students toward mastery of the learning target based on student data, as an essential component of practice. They reported remaining focused on student outcomes, ensuring that essential elements of a given commercial program are utilized in instruction while allowing them to move beyond scripted practices as necessary. Educators in this study asserted that, by starting with the end in mind, they can better ensure that their instruction is purposeful, aligned with learning objectives, and focused on helping students achieve mastery of key concepts and skills. One interviewee related, "I am always trying to put my end result right in front of me... And if I know what I'm looking for, then I feel more confident making changes." This teacher reported that it is important to have a clear goal or outcome in mind when making instructional decisions to enhance efficacy in navigating both scripted programs and responsive teaching practices. By maintaining a focus on desired outcomes, research participants feel they can effectively utilize scripted programs as a foundation while also adapting and modifying instruction in real-time to better meet the needs of

their students, allowing for a balance between adhering to structured frameworks and being responsive to the evolving dynamics of the classroom.

The following findings address the second research question: What leadership attitudes and practices around implementation fidelity and professional developmental opportunities contribute to responsive teaching practices?

Leadership Attitudes and Practices

Research participants had much to say about leadership practices that facilitate responsive teaching in partnership with commercial curricular programs.

Teacher Voice

Teachers interviewed for this study expressed that the inclusion of teacher voice in decisions about curriculum and instruction is essential. One talked about the absence of teacher voice, saying, “But they haven't even involved the teachers to say, I like it because, I don't like it because . . . They've made a decision on which program they're going [without teacher input].” Another teacher implored, “If you're going to use these scripted programs, please include your teachers.” Yet another interviewee explained, “All the teachers need to be involved from the get go. [Otherwise,] They won't have buy-in. They won't have an understanding if they don't feel a part of it.” These quotes underscore the feelings expressed by research participants about the importance of incorporating teacher voice and leadership practices in the adoption and implementation of commercial scripted programs. By involving teachers in the decision-making process, educational leaders can leverage their expertise and insights to ensure that scripted programs are selected and implemented in a manner that aligns with the unique context and needs of their classrooms, ultimately enhancing the quality and relevance of instruction. In essence, the participation of teachers and teacher leaders in decision-making processes

surrounding curriculum resources not only taps into their expertise but also promotes a collaborative and supportive educational environment that ultimately benefits both educators and students.

Study participants referenced including teacher voice in collaborative school-based goal setting related to student achievement at the beginning of the year as valuable in guiding their efforts for improvement and student success. This might involve setting achievement or growth goals for groups or individual students. One exemplary teacher referenced this type of work when saying, “I feel like that really does create a culture that suggests it’s okay to respond to what students need.” This statement suggests that, when they are involved in discussions and decisions that focus on outcome goals rather than scripts, teachers in this study feel better supported in shifting instruction in ways that support student growth. The collaborative process of goal setting empowered teachers to tailor their instructional strategies and interventions based on ongoing assessments and feedback, ultimately enhancing their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students and promote student success.

Clear Communication

Teachers in this study reported that clear communication around curricular expectations is important. Some teachers reported that communication from their building leaders was aligned with communication from their central offices, while others reported a mismatch. One teacher asked,

What is your leadership's goal? Is your goal to increase your NWEA growth goals by X amount by the end of the year, or to have checked off every single lesson in the curriculum? Which one is it? Be transparent about that, because, you know, if I would

hope it's raising the growth. Then it shouldn't matter if you skipped unit five, lesson four, and went ahead to unit six, lesson three.

This teacher represented the views expressed by other research participants regarding the importance of clear communication from leadership around instructional goals and priorities, particularly when implementing scripted programs. Teachers in this study felt that leaders should prioritize student growth and learning outcomes over strict adherence to scripted curricula, fostering a culture where teachers feel empowered to make instructional decisions that best support student progress. By aligning leadership goals with student achievement rather than completing prescribed lessons, educators can focus on meeting the individualized needs of their students and maximizing learning opportunities within the framework of scripted programs.

Being Present

Regarding leadership practices that support responsive teaching, teachers in this study reported that it is important that building leaders know their teachers and know what is happening in classrooms. One interviewee stated,

I want him [the principal] to be engaged and say, “Wow, that’s great for kids!” I think there are some principals who are really supportive and expansive in their thought about what education can be and others who are just, “Uh, did I get any complaints?”

This teacher alluded to the importance of being seen and respected for their professional skills. Even if the expectations communicated to teachers were around strict fidelity to a pacing schedule and lesson coverage, some teachers in this study reported that their administrators do not monitor what is actually taking place in classrooms. As a result, those administrators cannot have a complete picture of what is happening in the classroom. They may not, for example,

understand the gaps of the adopted program and the resulting gaps in student skills. Thus, they may not fully support teachers in making effective instructional decisions.

Another teacher stated,

Talk to your teachers. I think every principal, and I know this sounds ridiculous, I think every principal should have the opportunity in the month of September or month of August before school starts to have a conversation with every teacher about who they are, what their expectations are for the year, how they, is there anything you're nervous about that I can get you started with?

Another participant said,

Know your staff, know who your trailblazers are, know who's going to move, not your agenda, but move what you think is best for your school. I think it's important to know your teachers. Like really important, to know your teachers and to know who to listen to.

These teachers value open communication between school leaders and teachers and highlight the need for principals to understand teachers' individual strengths, concerns, and expectations at the beginning of the school year.

Professional Development

Regarding the implementation of commercial scripted programs, research participants reported that professional development should be structured around not only how best to utilize an adopted commercial, but also around increasing teachers' content knowledge. Around program use, one teacher said,

You can adopt any program. But if you don't give the teachers the professional development they need to implement said program, it's not going to be implemented strategically, right? People are going to do it how they think it should be done in their

independent classrooms. You have professional development, then you have common language, you have common strategies.

Without adequate training and support, teachers may struggle to implement an adopted program strategically and consistently across classrooms. By providing targeted professional development, educators can develop a common understanding and language around the program, ensuring that teachers are equipped with the necessary strategies to effectively implement the scripted curriculum and maximize its impact on student learning.

Teachers also stated that deep content knowledge is essential in supporting teaching and learning. One participant stated,

The first thing is knowing your content. And I don't mean curriculum, I mean content. When you are grounded in the content . . . the greater understanding you have of your content, the more solidly you're able to predict pitfalls to make microshifts [in instruction].

Another teacher said,

I think it needs to be explicitly said. Oftentimes the professional development is given by the publisher who creates it. So they're never going to admit to the gaps that exist. So I think that's why it's important to have strong teacher leaders who have the experience and content knowledge.

These teachers feel that deep content knowledge is crucial for the effective implementation of scripted commercial programs, as it allows teachers to understand the material comprehensively and make informed instructional decisions. With a strong grasp of the content, educators can confidently navigate scripted curricula and step outside it or beyond it as necessary to effectively explain concepts, provide appropriate scaffolding,

and address student questions or misconceptions, ultimately enhancing the quality of instruction and facilitating learning for all students.

Honoring Professional Judgment

Study participants articulated that they felt it is important that educational leaders honor their professional judgment. One teacher said this very simply, stating, “First of all, honor teachers. Trust that they were hired with professional judgment in place.” Another talked of the absence of trust in saying,

It just reminds me of this principal . . . who handed out the schedule, the weekly schedule. And if I come in your room at 9:05, you had better be doing whatever it says. And I'm like, no little kids operate like that ever.

These teachers spoke to their need to feel respected as professionals and as educators who are able to make decisions that are in the best interest of their students.

Another interviewee related,

I feel like writ large as a teaching profession, there is no other comparable profession where the professional is trusted less. And it grinds my gears. Because again, it comes back to, you're going to have the good teachers, you're going to have the bad teachers, for layman's terms. But as an exemplary teacher, as a teacher who gives herself to everything that I do, it feels so bizarre to have someone look at me and question where I'm at.

This sentiment was shared by another teacher who said,

Especially if you're a teacher who's furthered your education, who has gone on to receive a higher degree, who has increased their credits, who has received different accolades, has gone on to be a Board Certified teacher, you know, especially if you're someone who is putting yourself forth as a learner and a leader, to have someone look at you and just

not trust all of the decisions or at least assume trust or assume best intentions, it can feel infuriating and belittling. And I think that if there's any sort of, you know, kernel of displeasure in a curriculum or distrust in an administration, that kernel has the possibility of exploding simply by a teacher feeling like, they don't trust my professionalism or lean on the fact that I'm an educational leader.

The frustration expressed by these teachers was not uncommon among research participants, feeling that their dedication and expertise are undervalued. The opposite condition would be one in which educators feel trusted and supported by leadership to make professional judgments that best meet the needs of their students.

Some teachers shared their experiences of being valued as a professional, such as this teacher who stated,

I have found myself in districts where the trust in the educators is great, but with that great trust also comes great responsibility. And so you also better be able to show at the end of your units or your year or your reporting periods that your students are either where they need to be or if they're not, the interventions you've put in place to support them.

Another teacher put it this way,

Here's our curriculum, here's where we start. But the expectation is that we meet the needs of kids. Okay. You know, [the principal] may ask us, you know, why aren't here? But if I can say, because they still don't know this, and I'm not doing the same lesson every day, I'm doing new experiences, and here they are. Here are my notes. I mean, they may ask for a why. I'm okay with that. I'm okay with them asking why? Because that also gives me a chance [to talk about my instruction and how students are responding].

Research participants reported that the leaders in their schools play a pivotal role in setting the tone for organizational culture and priorities, and that their leadership style, communication strategies, and commitment to professional development all contribute to the overall perception and acceptance of curriculum resources among the teaching staff. One Maine educator put it this way:

I just wonder if there is a way that administration can adopt a shift, not only in language, but a shift in the way they are transparent about their trust. You know, we have hired you because we believe in who you are as an educator, and we believe that you can rise to meet the demands of this curriculum and we are trusting you to do it with integrity. Whether that means by the book with fidelity or that means stepping outside where you need, we are trusting you to take that on. We will also be accountable, and you will be accountable to us...I just wonder if there's a way to shift that and to give back a piece of that trust, to give back a piece of that professionalism. Adhere to that old adage, right? With great power comes great responsibility. So give that back. Then you're starting to rebuild trust between administrators and teachers.

This teacher suggests a desire for administrators to adopt a more transparent approach to trust, acknowledging teachers' professionalism and agency in meeting curriculum demands. By empowering teachers with trust and accountability, administrators can foster a culture of mutual respect and responsibility, thereby strengthening relationships between administrators and teachers. This shift in perspective could enhance collaboration and promote a shared commitment to student success within the educational community.

Trustworthiness

This research study involved a relatively small sample size. Participants represented varying demographic factors such as rurality, district and school size, and experience, helping to ensure the transferability of results. When coding interview transcripts, I considered findings to be relevant only if views were expressed by a majority of participants. Member checking was utilized, with each research participant having the opportunity to review the completed interview transcript to ensure that it accurately represented their intent. Peer review of the manuscript was utilized to offer external consideration regarding research methods and analysis. Additionally, artifacts from Maine County Teacher of the Year application packets were examined for triangulation purposes, enhancing the credibility and dependability of research findings by increasing the reliability of results and offering a more comprehensive understanding of the exemplary teachers' orientation toward fidelity mandates.

This study addressed instructional decision-making and practices in reading and math as they relate to district-adopted commercial curricular programs in grades Kindergarten through 8. Because this study explored the orientation teachers take regarding their own agency in designing and implementing instructional practices rather than exploring specific grade level or content area practices, these findings may be generalizable to other grade levels and content areas.

Summary

This chapter detailed answers provided by research participants to interview questions that were designed to address the research questions:

1) What is the stance that exemplary teachers take toward district mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of district-adopted commercial programs in reading and mathematics?;

2) What leadership attitudes and practices around implementation fidelity and professional developmental opportunities contribute to responsive teaching practices?

The findings of this study reveal that exemplary teachers adopt a flexible approach to interpreting fidelity mandates. They are strongly influenced by a sense of personal responsibility for their students' progress and are guided by student needs more than by program dictates. They are confident in their ability to make professional decisions that honor the diverse needs of their students. They take a stance that considers integrity of implementation over strict fidelity, meaning that learning targets and assessments remain consistent with program goals, while instructional strategies may flex to ensure that instruction is relevant and accessible to all students.

Exemplary teachers can provide valuable insight into effective leadership practices that support teachers in responsive teaching practices. These leadership practices include clear and consistent communication regarding expectations around fidelity of implementation of commercial programs, collaborative goal setting involving teachers, and visibility of administrators that contributes to leaders' knowledge of classroom practices and strengths and areas of growth involving individual teachers. Professional development opportunities should include increasing teachers' content knowledge as well as exploration of commercial program benefits and pitfalls.

In Chapter 5, I will review the purpose of this study and summarize key findings. I will interpret the findings as they relate to the conceptual framework that guided this work. I will then

discuss implications of the findings when implementing commercial curricular programs.

Additionally, I will suggest further research that may be called for in furthering the body of knowledge around best practices that support responsive teaching practices that lead to improved student outcomes.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how exemplary teachers design instruction that responds to collective and individual needs of students while working within the parameters of district expectations around fidelity of implementation of commercial scripted curricular programs. This study further explored the leadership practices that support all teachers in responsive teaching practices while utilizing district-adopted curricular resources. This chapter presents a discussion of major findings as related to current literature on implementation fidelity, teacher agency and professional judgment, and instructional practices that address the diverse needs of students. The chapter will close with an examination of the limitations of the study, suggested areas for future research, implications for use by school leaders, and a brief conclusion.

While scripted programs have some strengths, they also come with certain challenges. Giroux (2016) voiced particularly strong criticism of commercial programs:

Market-driven educational reforms, with their obsession with standardization, high-stakes testing, and punitive policies, also mimic a culture of cruelty that neoliberal policies produce in the wider society. They exhibit contempt for teachers and distrust of parents, repress creative teaching, destroy challenging and imaginative programs of study and treat students as mere inputs on an assembly line. Trust, imagination, creativity, and a respect for critical teaching and learning are thrown to the wind in the pursuit of profits and the proliferation of rigid, death-dealing accountability schemes. (p. 352)

Giroux's argument centers on the negative impact of market-driven educational reforms that devalue the creative and critical aspects of teaching and learning. Such approaches can erode trust in teachers and parents, limit educational innovation, and commodify students as simply

outputs of a production line. Giroux's criticism is echoed to a degree in the responses of research participants for this study. However, their responses portray a more complex, nuanced picture that provides room for recognition of benefits of commercial programs in certain contexts, while cautioning against the potential drawbacks highlighted by Giroux, including the risk of diminishing teacher autonomy and stifling creativity. While commercial programs may offer structured approaches for teaching, they often lack the necessary flexibility and adaptability to address the diverse needs within the classroom. Consequently, teachers may need to innovate and supplement prescribed programs with their own strategies and materials to provide more relevant and personalized learning opportunities. Participants of this study note the importance of exercising this flexibility in conjunction with commercial programs to allow for responsive teaching practices that cater to the unique needs of their students.

There is little evidence that a causal relationship exists between strict fidelity of implementation of scripted programs and student achievement (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Despite the ubiquitous adoption of such programs, large numbers of students are not successful in reaching grade-level proficiency targets, leading to ever more strident criticism of schools and of teachers (Vaughn et al., 2022). On the other hand, there is some evidence that points to teachers' individual instructional skill level as a more positive influence on student achievement than strict adherence to a scripted program (Capin et al., 2022). Despite such evidence, many school districts continue to emphasize fidelity to scripted commercial programs as the preferred method to increase student achievement (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020), and so offer professional development for teachers that promotes such fidelity. This type of professional development is not always relevant to teachers attempting to address the diverse needs of students, including those students

who are unable to meet learning targets under strict fidelity mandates (Jaffe-Walter & Fancsali, 2021).

The design of instructional strategies must acknowledge and address students' collective and individual backgrounds, including their prior knowledge and diverse experiences, to create learning opportunities that are relevant, motivating, and provide appropriate scaffolds (Cantor et al., 2021). Feedback from teachers in this study about the inadequacy of English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics instructional materials in meeting the needs of diverse learners and providing personally relevant instruction highlights important challenges in education. This feedback suggests that the current materials may not be sufficiently inclusive or adaptable to cater to the diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and needs of all students (EdReports, 2022). Despite the widespread adoption of commercial programs in schools, which demands significant investment of time, funding, and human capital, schools often report little change in academic results (Bryk et al., 2015). When students fail to respond under fidelity mandates, teachers may feel a decreased sense of self-efficacy (Mboweni & Matshidiso, 2022) as well as a decreased sense of professional agency (Unsworth & Tummons, 2021). Mette & Riegel (2018) caution against fixating on student achievement measures to the exclusion of supporting teachers' professional judgment around instructional decisions.

Many people have heard stories of drivers following directions provided by an online navigation program despite clues around them indicating the directions were faulty, even to the extent that the directions led them directly into a body of water. To be sure, such online services are valuable tools for navigation, just as a scripted commercial program is a valuable tool that can provide a clear roadmap specifying an appropriate scope and sequence of grade level content. However, blindly following directions without considering one's current surroundings

can lead to negative consequences. While having a structured curriculum or using online navigational tools can provide guidance, it is crucial for educators to retain the flexibility to adapt and make decisions based on the specific needs of their students and the context in which they are teaching. Blindly following a script, like blindly following less-than-fully-informed directions, can lead to unintended consequences and missed opportunities for meaningful learning.

My teaching career began before the widespread adoption of educational benchmarks and high-stakes accountability assessments. In those early years, I designed my own instructional units tailored to the needs and interests of my students. For instance, in reading instruction, I sought advice from special education colleagues and attended workshops to enhance my teaching expertise. Over time, my confidence grew, and I developed a strong ability to teach reading effectively. As commercial programs began to become more prevalent in schools, administrators directed me to use scripted programs. However, having already established a reputation as a highly skilled teacher, I experienced minimal oversight of my classroom practices. While I incorporated some elements of the district's commercial programs and found them valuable, my daily practices that significantly improved my students' reading skills were based on my deep content knowledge and insights into my students' needs. Of perhaps five daily practices that I perceived to be most integral in increasing my students' reading skills, none were components of a district-adopted program. I navigated this space by synthesizing my professional expertise with the requirements of the district's commercial program, engaging in a process of sensemaking.

Transitioning to an administrative role allowed me to observe and engage with teachers across different schools and backgrounds. Many educators recounted experiences of being "penalized" during evaluations for deviating from scripted programs, such as spending a few

extra minutes on a lesson or choosing a different read-aloud book that better suited their students' needs. As mentioned previously, one teacher even alluded to signing an agreement to adhere strictly to the district program. From my perspective as an administrator, I have seen how an over-reliance on scripted programs can limit the depth and richness of teaching and learning, restricting teachers' abilities to tailor instruction to individual student needs. These programs, while offering structure, can hinder meaningful engagement, critical thinking, and responsiveness to diverse classroom contexts. My direct experiences with these issues inspired this research, aiming to learn from exemplary teachers and contribute a balanced perspective to the ongoing discourse on fidelity mandates in education.

Giroux's (2016) quote at the beginning of this chapter highlights the importance of challenging oppressive systems in education. I would agree with his stance that education should empower all students regardless of background. In my professional experience, I have observed that a rigid adherence to prescribed curricula and mandates can sometimes limit students' potential. Teachers may find themselves constrained by strict guidelines, hindering their ability to engage students in meaningful dialogue, critical inquiry, and relevant instruction. However, I have also seen teachers who have wrestled with sensemaking and have creatively navigated these constraints, infusing their teaching with opportunities for students to question, reflect, and apply their learning in real-world contexts. This aligns with Giroux's (2016) ideals, as these educators strive to empower students. Ultimately, my experience suggests that while systemic limitations around fidelity mandates can pose challenges, it is possible for educators to integrate the use of commercial programs with responsive teaching practices. Critically, leadership practices that support such integration are key.

The results of this study reveal that the participating exemplary teachers hold several common attitudes and engage in several common practices as they engage in sensemaking and consider how they approach their work under fidelity mandates. The exemplary teachers who took part in this study are highly motivated with an internal locus that considers them personally responsible for their students' academic growth. Because of this, they are more likely to take their cues from student needs rather than from program mandates. Research participants believe in their self-efficacy to make professional decisions that respect and address the myriad needs of their students. While their instruction remains consistent with the learning targets of their local curriculum and/or scripted program, they may adjust their instructional strategies to include techniques and resources that increase relevance and accessibility for all students.

Exemplary teachers can offer constructive advice regarding effective leadership practices that facilitate responsive teaching practices. Such leadership practices involve clarity of communication related to expectations of fidelity of implementation of commercial programs, collaborative processes that include teachers in setting school goals, and administrators' consistent presence in classrooms that adds to leaders' familiarity of classroom practices as well as individual teachers' instructional skills. Exemplary teachers agree that professional development opportunities must lead to increasing teachers' content knowledge.

Interpretation of Findings

Strengths and Challenges of Scripted Programs

Research participants concurred that there are benefits to be gained from scripted curricular programs. They can be advantageous for schools aiming to ensure that teachers adhere closely to research-based instructional practices, theoretically leading to better student outcomes. Exemplary teachers appreciated that scripted programs can provide an evidence-based scope and

sequence, particularly when a local school district has not articulated its own curriculum.

Interview participants acknowledged that scripted programs can provide a standardized approach to instruction, ensuring that the same academic expectations are held for all district students in each grade level. Many scripted programs are designed to align closely with educational standards, ensuring that the curriculum covers the necessary content and skills required for student success on standardized assessments. Study participants noted that the use of a scripted program can support teachers new to the profession as well as paraprofessionals. The detailed scripts provide clear guidance on what to teach, how to teach it, and the expected sequence of instruction. As schools employ new teachers and paraprofessionals to provide instruction, current research suggests that scripted programs may lead to their increased confidence (Cooke et al., 2011).

One of the main criticisms of scripted programs voiced by participants in this study is lack of flexibility. Teachers can feel constrained by the prescribed scripts, making it challenging to adapt instruction to the unique needs and interests of their students. Scripted programs may stifle teacher creativity and autonomy in the classroom. Educators may feel limited in their ability to respond effectively to the changing dynamics of their class and the collective and individual needs of their students. Exemplary teachers argue that scripted programs can lead to decreased student engagement. When lessons are highly predictable and follow a rigid structure, students may become disinterested or disengaged, especially if the material does not resonate with their individual learning needs. The focus on fidelity to the script may lead to an overemphasis on compliance rather than reflective and responsive teaching. Teachers may prioritize following the script precisely over adapting their instruction based on ongoing

assessment and student feedback. Study participants argued that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective for all learners.

Exemplary Educator Orientation Toward Work

The teachers involved in this study relied on their own internal compass in making instructional decisions. In this way, the exemplary teachers in this study are very similar to those researched by Allington (2002). “These teachers seemed to understand that professional responsibility meant choosing how to teach . . . they rejected the low-autonomy/ high-accountability models that seem increasingly popular with advocates of ‘proven programs’” (Allington, 2002, Summary section, para. 5). Rather than waiting for permission from an external authority, study participants gave themselves permission to shift instructional techniques and resources to bring relevance to the classroom for each student. Their thinking echoes that of Taylor (2016), who reported on “the emphasis in research on finding the most effective curriculum programs or the most effective teaching practices as separate from one another” (p. 440). While scripted programs offer benefits such as consistency and fidelity of implementation, they also face challenges related to flexibility, teacher autonomy, student engagement, and addressing individual learning needs. Striking a balance between a structured curriculum and allowing for teacher creativity and responsiveness to student needs is crucial for effective and meaningful education.

Exemplary teachers can provide much guidance to colleagues regarding instructional practices that align with intended learning targets while responding to individual student needs. This study revealed that the exemplary educator orientation toward work with students is characterized by a deep commitment to fostering learning and development, recognizing the diverse needs of students, and maintaining a strong sense of integrity in the implementation of

educational practices. This orientation leads to alternate interpretations of fidelity, particularly in terms of the integrity of implementation.

Excellent teachers prioritize the needs and individual differences of their students through responsive teaching. This orientation toward instruction reinforces current literature regarding learning theories. Instructional design that is informed by various learning theories defines students' experiences as essential considerations in that design. *Behaviorism* defines learning as a change in behavior, recognizing that behavior is learned and thus is highly dependent upon one's personal experiences. Behavior is dictated by the particular setting in which it occurs (Saunders & Wong, 2020). *Humanism* as related to instructional design supports student success "in such a way as to recognize a student's human right to critical inquiry, reflection, and agency" (Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 222), and ensures classrooms are places in which "students feel safe to express their understandings. . . lived experiences are valued. . . [and] lessons are seen in the formation of dynamic epistemologies" (Magill & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 222). In classrooms that involve *cognitivism*-based approaches, teachers acknowledge that instruction must be based on student's current mental schema, with students "encouraged to express and connect their prior knowledge, learning experiences, and abilities to learn new information" (Al-Shammari et al., 2019, p. 410). Bada and Olusegun (2015) explain that *constructivism* holds that all learning is affected by the context in which it is taught as well as by an individual student's own beliefs and attitudes. Students must "actively construct knowledge in their own minds. . . they discover and transform information, check new information against old, and revise rules when they no longer apply" (Bada & Olusegun, 2015, p. 66).

The nuances among these various learning theories are subtle but distinct. Yet each of these theories mandate that teachers focus on the needs and lived experiences of individual

students to optimize learning. Instructional design efforts must “acknowledge students’ prior knowledge and experiences while expanding over time into new areas, foster student voice and agency, and feature engaging, relevant content [and] well-scaffolded instruction that supports the personalization of learning” (Cantor et. al., 2021, p. 26). Of particular importance to our discussion is the notion, informed by all cited learning theories, that new learning is highly dependent upon an individual’s prior experiences. The teachers involved in this study recognize this, demonstrating a commitment to making instruction relevant to all learners. To best serve the needs of all students, schools must question organizational principles that prioritize standardization and instead must incorporate insights from current research that prioritize personalized responses to children’s strengths and needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Fidelity in education is not about rigidly adhering to a set of predetermined methods, but rather adapting instructional strategies to meet the unique requirements of each learner. The use of unresponsive curricula that fosters one-size-fits-all instruction may contribute to teachers’ “deterministic or stereotypical perceptions (that) lead to lower expectations” (Hajisoteriou et al., 2023, p. 500). A student-centered adaptive interpretation of fidelity emphasizes a genuine commitment to student success rather than a strict adherence to a standardized approach. Instead of viewing fidelity as a static and inflexible adherence to a curriculum or instructional model, exemplary educators embrace flexibility and innovation. Fidelity, for the exemplary educators involved in this study, extends to the inclusivity of their teaching practices. They recognize the importance of adapting instruction to the diverse perspectives of their students, fostering an environment where all students feel valued and included.

Exemplary educators prioritize authentic engagement with students, going beyond surface-level adherence to procedures. They understand that true fidelity involves connecting

with students on a personal level, building relationships, and creating a positive and inclusive learning environment, which requires going beyond the script of a commercial curricular program. This interpretation underscores the importance of the educator-student relationship as a cornerstone of effective teaching, which is supported in educational research as a positive influence on students' engagement and achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda et al, 2011).

Instead of ensuring that each lesson is delivered in a scripted way according to a rigid pacing schedule using only prescribed resources, exemplary educators maintain focus on learning goals and maintain their agency in making professional decisions to adjust instruction and use alternate resources in ways that are relevant to the students in front of them. Current literature supports this approach to instruction as an alternative to scripted practices (Dresser, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2021). This approach to teaching and learning reflects a commitment to integrity of implementation that deprioritizes strict adherence to predefined methods and prioritizes a dynamic, responsive, and student-focused attitude in the classroom.

Rather than measuring fidelity solely based on the fidelity of implementation to a specific program or curriculum, exemplary educators emphasize the outcomes and impact on student learning. They recognize that the ultimate goal is student success and mastery of skills, and they are willing to modify their approaches if it leads to better outcomes. These teachers utilize strategies or structures that are additional or in place of those provided by commercial programs to gather data that informs their instructional decisions. They view fidelity as a dynamic process that involves continuous monitoring and adjustment. They interpret fidelity in terms of using evidence and feedback to refine their teaching practices, ensuring that they are meeting the evolving needs of their students. The exemplary educator mindset toward work with students

leads to alternate interpretations of fidelity by prioritizing student-centered approaches, flexibility, authentic engagement, focus on outcomes, and data-informed decision-making.

Addressing the Diverse Needs of Students Through Responsive Teaching

Scripted curricular programs are ubiquitous in schools today. However, as Cohen et al. (2003) observed,

Several decades of research suggest that access it [to programs and resources] does not cause learning. Researchers report that schools and teachers with the same resources do different things, with different results for learning. The differences depend on the *use* (emphasis added) of resources . . . Some would say that is obvious, but if it is obvious in principle, it has not been so in practice. Consider the almost exclusive focus on resource provision, in 150 years of education policy; only in the last few decades has there been any attention at all to use. (Cohen et al., 2003, pp. 119-120)

Teachers involved in this research suggest that teachers need to be supported in using resources, namely scripted commercial programs, in ways that support the collective and individual needs of children. This calls for the encouragement of responsive instruction that may utilize supplemental resources and strategies as dictated by student needs rather than by the constraints of a commercial program.

Responsive teaching is an instructional approach that recognizes and addresses the diverse needs of students by adapting lessons and resources to meet their individual abilities and interests. This approach goes beyond a standardized, universal model and emphasizes flexibility, differentiation, and a deep understanding of each student, and is supported by current science-informed educational literature. Human development and skill acquisition do not occur in linear fashions, but rather within highly individual contexts that include such factors as peer and adult

support, biological and emotional states, sociocultural norms, and content areas (Stafford-Brizard et al, 2017). Exemplary teachers in this study communicated a strong commitment to responsive teaching practices. Teaching is “not strictly a technical/rational, skill-driven task” (Seghedini, 2014, p. 13). Research participants exemplify teaching as an art form, one that requires a dedication to building relationships and to ensuring that each student has personally relevant tools that will help them succeed.

Exemplary teachers tailor teaching methods and materials to accommodate the varying abilities and learning needs of students. They practice culturally responsive teaching which fosters an inclusive learning environment and helps students connect their own experiences to the content. These teachers provide various pathways for students to acquire and demonstrate knowledge, allowing them to engage with the content in ways that align with their strengths. They use ongoing formative assessment strategies to gauge student understanding and progress. In so doing, they are able to identify areas where students may need additional support or challenge and instruction accordingly. Their regular feedback helps create a dynamic and responsive learning environment.

Study participants regularly reflect on their teaching practices and are open to adapting strategies based on student needs and feedback. Responsive teaching is a continuous process of refinement and improvement to ensure that instruction remains effective and relevant. By embracing responsive teaching strategies, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that addresses the diverse needs of all students, fostering academic success and a positive educational experience.

Leadership Attitudes and Practices

Leaders in schools play a pivotal role in setting the tone, expectations, and practices that support responsive teaching practices. “School leadership improves teaching and learning, indirectly and most powerfully, by improving the status of significant key classroom and school conditions that further enhance student success at school” (Leithwood et al., 2020, p. 12). While messages that teachers in this study received from district leadership around implementation fidelity did not necessarily align with the messages they received from building-level leadership, these teachers employed sensemaking to reconcile various messages around instruction with their own knowledge of what their students need.

To support responsive teaching practices in conjunction with commercial scripted programs, teachers in this study concur with prior research findings that prioritize teacher voice, engaging in “power with rather than power over” (Glickman & Mette, 2020, p. 83) educators in their buildings, thus facilitating sensemaking as educators seek to design and implement practices that incorporate elements of commercial programs with responsive teaching practices. This speaks to the value cited by research participants of collaboratively establishing shared school goals. Through shared goals, leaders must maintain “an unwavering priority of establishing and fostering an environment that tends to the Whole Child: healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged” (Hall et al., 2016, p. 96). This type of environment, supported by research participants, supports teachers in responsive teaching practices. Instructing and reading from a script alone cannot develop the potential of each child. Rather, if leaders “are to better meet the needs of *all* the children who attend their school, then they must be able to inspire others to think differently and change practices” (Glickman & Mette, 2020, p. 83).

Teachers who participated in this research noted the importance of clear communication from school leaders, which is supported by established research.

The more a leader can minimize wide discrepancies of instructional practice from classroom to classroom, the better. Therefore, it is extremely important to implement and support a school-wide common language of instruction and encourage understanding of, and agreement about, best classroom practices - specifically those practices most closely correlated to gains in student achievement. (Carbaugh et al., 2015, p. 47).

Carbaugh notes that effective leadership practices should prioritize the establishment of a common language of instruction and consensus on best practices among educators, ensuring alignment with curriculum goals in ways that maximize the impact of core programs on student achievement. By fostering a cohesive and supportive environment, school leaders can facilitate successful implementation of commercial curricular programs while promoting a shared commitment to responsive teaching practices and student success. This is echoed by Hall et al. (2016) who encourage school leaders to “develop policies and practices that cultivate staff as reflective practitioners” (p. 97).

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the small research sample of 11 elementary and middle school teachers in Maine. Despite being a small sample, these teachers provided a broad representation of school districts in the state, with differing sizes of school administrative units as well as of individual schools. Schools with varying degrees of rurality were included in the research sample. The 11 research participants are teacher leaders who have been involved in extensive work with colleagues within their own school systems as well as throughout the state.

As such, these participants provide a balanced picture of the circumstances under which teachers and students may flourish under expectations of fidelity to district-adopted curricular programs.

Recommendations for Further Study

The choice of qualitative research for this study allowed participants to share experiences and attitudes unique to them. Qualitative research tools, such as interviews, are not meant to reveal hard facts. The findings of this study could be further supported by quantitative research, such as a survey of a larger number of teachers representing a broader cross-section of instructional experiences, skills, and personal orientations toward their work.

Several areas for future research might add to the findings of this study. A quantitative study could explore the degree to which teachers in the field feel compelled to follow commercial scripted programs with fidelity, the degree to which they feel compelled to adjust their instruction to improve academic outcomes for their students, and their satisfaction with working under their current expectations of fidelity. Such a study would provide insight into teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding fidelity to commercial scripted programs, shedding light on the optimal balance between adherence to prescribed curricula and responsiveness to students' needs. Understanding the extent to which teachers feel compelled to adjust their instruction for student success and their satisfaction with fidelity expectations can inform the effectiveness and implementation of scripted programs in real-world educational settings. Additionally, there is little research that establishes a clear causal connection between strict fidelity to a program and increased student outcomes, just as there is little research that establishes a definitive causal connection between responsive teaching practices and improved student outcomes. Such research is necessary to inform effective instructional practices.

The educators involved in this research study have all been recognized as Maine County Teachers of the Year. It is likely that they have had rich opportunities to engage in sensemaking as they have navigated the educational landscape in their work settings in ways that successfully reconcile scripted commercial programs with responsive teaching practices. Thus, the results of this study may be a bidirectional product of this sensemaking process. Throughout interviews, some research participants expressed more frustration with fidelity mandates than other participants. Further study regarding the conditions that lead teachers to productive sensemaking around this topic would be interesting and could prompt educational leaders to facilitate such conditions.

Implications for Leadership Practices and Policy Implementation

School leaders play a crucial role in overseeing implementation of district-adopted curricular programs, including expectations around fidelity. Exemplary teachers agree that integrity of implementation is preferable to strict fidelity and leads to better outcomes for all students. This is supported by research on the impact of scripted literacy (Dresser, 2012) and math instruction (Taylor, 2016). Integrity of implementation requires that teachers adhere to established learning goals set by the local district and by the program adopted by the district while using their professional judgment to shift instruction in ways that respond to the needs of their students. School administrators must recognize the importance of flexibility within the framework of fidelity expectations. While adherence to academic goals is crucial, leaders are well-advised to trust educators' professional judgment and encourage them to adapt their instruction based on individual student needs, allowing for personalized approaches within the parameters of the district and program goals.

It is incumbent upon school leaders to provide ongoing professional development opportunities that ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement programs effectively. While administrators do not generally impact student learning directly, their practices influence students in meaningful ways. This includes interactions with teachers through professional support, coaching, and supervision and evaluation practices, as well as their leadership in creating policies and establishing the community and culture of a school (Guskey & Sparks, 2002). Teachers need deep content knowledge, responsive instructional skills, and professional trust of their supervisors. As Dresser (2012) cautions, “Many teachers using scripted programs are afraid to reject or even question school adopted programs, even when students are failing. Instead, they comply and follow a limited prepackaged model of education” (p. 82). This type of scenario, reminiscent of the analogy about online navigational tools, is a familiar one to research participants, who see professional development and support from leadership as a means of avoiding such a situation. The primary goal of any professional development endeavor is to impact teachers’ knowledge and practices in ways that lead to improved student outcomes (Guskey & Sparks, 2002). Intentional planning of professional development and consideration of effective as well as non-effective professional development is key. Additionally, educational leaders must prioritize honest discussions about instructional strategies that lead to student growth, encouraging teachers to analyze data and shift practices as necessary.

The research literature and the empirical instructional analysis agree on the importance of professional development that is based on content/curriculum, particularly as compared with professional development centered purely on pedagogy. Coaching as a form of professional development also is supported by both of these sources . . . Collaborative planning, meanwhile, is supported by the research literature, by teachers and school

leaders, and marginally by the empirical instructional analysis. Professional development based on the needs of teacher participants and their students is emphasized by the research, and by teacher and school leaders, but, interestingly, is not really upheld by the empirical instructional analysis. (Quick et al., 2009, p. 65)

The quote from Quick et al. (2009) highlights the significance of professional development rooted in content and curriculum over purely pedagogical training, with coaching emerging as a beneficial form of professional development. Research around instructional analysis supports the emphasis of professional development related to content knowledge over that related to discrete needs of teachers and students. Differentiated professional development for teachers around deep content knowledge is essential for enhancing instructional quality and meeting diverse student needs. Tailoring professional development to the specific content areas teachers work in ensures they gain a robust understanding of subject matter, enabling them to design effective lessons, anticipate and proactively address student's misconceptions, respond flexibly to students' learning styles and levels. This approach supports teachers in staying current with the latest research and practices in their fields, fostering continuous growth and excellence in education.

Research participants noted that district and building leadership should involve teachers in the decision-making process related to program selection and implementation. This is supported by current research. Principals' impact on the climate of a school "comes almost entirely through teacher influence in decision-making. . . empowering teachers to wield greater influence over school policy matters concerning the school learning climate may be the most effective strategy for principals to improve student achievement" (Sebastian et al., 2016, Discussion section, para. 6). Collaboration fosters a sense of ownership and allows for the

incorporation of diverse perspectives, leading to more successful implementation once a program is selected.

As a program is implemented, all stakeholders should prioritize the use of data to inform decision-making related to instruction. Stakeholders must analyze assessment results and other relevant data to gauge the effectiveness of the adopted programs and make instructional adjustments as needed to improve student outcomes. Leadership must create channels for open communication where concerns can be expressed, and work collaboratively to find solutions that balance program elements with the needs of the teaching staff and the needs of students. In doing so, school leaders can foster a culture of continuous improvement by encouraging reflection and refinement of practices.

School policies that support responsive teaching practices are necessary in ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed. The results of this study support policies that allow for flexibility in curriculum design and implementation, enabling educators to tailor instruction to meet the diverse needs of students. While it is reasonable that a district may adopt a core program to meet curricular goals, it is essential that educators are able to utilize supplemental or alternative strategies and resources when student data suggests they are called for, and that they are able to do so quickly and seamlessly.

Conclusion

The intersection of Weick's sensemaking framework and the works of researchers such as Linda Darling-Hammond and Pamela Cantor in relation to fidelity mandates highlights the complexities of implementing prescribed instructional programs in schools while addressing students' diverse needs and ensuring equitable and holistic education (Ancona, 2012; Bingham et al., 2024; Cantor, 2021; Cantor et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Darling-

Hammond et al., 2020, 2021, 2023; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 2012). Darling-Hammond's work emphasizes the importance of equity in education, including access to high-quality instruction for all students. When fidelity mandates are in place, teachers may use sensemaking to navigate the tension between adhering to prescribed programs and ensuring equitable outcomes for diverse student populations. Cantor's research promotes holistic approaches to education, addressing students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Weick's framework informs how teachers, including the exemplary teachers involved in this study, interpret fidelity mandates in light of their students' whole-child development, guiding decisions about when to deviate from prescribed programs to better meet students' comprehensive needs. By leveraging sensemaking, teachers can adapt their practices to align with the goals of equity, whole-child development, and supportive environments, while balancing the demands of fidelity mandates with the need for responsive teaching.

The results of this study suggest that exemplary teaching practices involve a flexible approach to implementation of commercial scripted programs in K-8 settings. In their book *Creative Schools*, Robinson and Aronica (2015) wrote, “The basic prerequisite for effective education is to cultivate students’ enthusiasm for learning. That means understanding how students learn, providing a diverse curriculum, and supporting methods of teaching and assessment that motivate rather than inhibit learning” (p. 231). The field of education would be well-advised to take note of the practices of exemplary teachers, who have proven themselves to be skilled at improving outcomes for students. These teachers implement commercial programs in flexible ways that promote responsive teaching. Effective school leadership around implementation of commercial scripted programs involves a combination of communication, support, collaboration, data analysis, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Leaders

who approach fidelity expectations with a balanced and thoughtful perspective can help create a positive and conducive environment for successful implementation. Doing so will enable our schools to live up to the promise of supporting all students.

Imagine a world where every child's life was a succession of opportunities in which they come to know who they are and in which they discover who they could become. . .

Imagine too that educators could find how best to identify each child's specific abilities, interests, and aspirations and then align those attributes with the specific contexts that best promoted the child's talents, achievements, and successes in life. Finally, imagine that each child lived in a world that removed the constraints of racism, poverty, disparities, and injustices and provided them with the specific relationships and supports needed for thriving. (Rose, 2021, Foreword)

It is my hope that this study may serve as a vital next step in advancing understanding of fidelity to commercial scripted programs and its impact on teaching practices. Valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics between fidelity, responsiveness, and student outcomes were revealed by delving deep into exemplary teachers' perceptions and experiences around this subject. Ultimately, this research has the potential to inform more effective implementation strategies for scripted programs, ensuring they better support educators in meeting the diverse needs of their students while maintaining fidelity to curriculum standards.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Initial Recruitment Script

Recruitment Script (initial email to targeted participants)

Dear Maine Educator,

I am reaching out to you in the hopes that you would be willing to participate in a doctoral research study I am conducting titled: *Examining the Impact of Implementation Fidelity Mandates on Instructional Practices in K-8 Settings*. The intention of this study is to better understand the impact that fidelity mandates around commercial scripted reading and math programs have on instructional practices. I obtained your contact information from Maine Department of Education public access lists and/or from your school website. Your unique position as a Maine County Teacher of the Year identifies you as an exemplary teacher, and I would like to be able to use your insight and expertise to add to the body of research that shapes leadership and instructional practices in schools. It is my hope that such practices will better address the diverse needs of students so that all students will have the opportunity to succeed.

If you decide to participate in this research study, you will take part in a Zoom interview that will take between 45 and 60 minutes. Video and audio recordings of the interview will be made if you agree to do so, or the interview can be conducted using notes only if you choose not to be recorded. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience, sometime between February and May of this year. I will also ask you to share your Maine Teacher of the Year application packet to help add to and triangulate interview responses. A full description of the study is provided as “informed consent” information and is attached to this email.

Collecting this qualitative data about the impact of fidelity mandates will be extremely beneficial to the study. Please respond to this email if you agree to participate, or if you have any questions about this study.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Anita Hopkins

Ed.D candidate

University of Maine

APPENDIX B: Follow-Up Recruitment Script

Recruitment Script (second email to targeted participants)

Good Morning, [Teacher's name],

I'm following up on an email I sent a couple of weeks ago. I'm currently a doctoral candidate at UMaine, conducting research titled: *Examining the Impact of Implementation Fidelity Mandates on Instructional Practices in K-8 Settings*. As a Maine educator of over 30 years, I know how crucial it is that the voices of exemplary teachers such as yours are elevated in order to improve outcomes for all students throughout the state. My hope is to interview one TOY awardee from each county. I have already had the opportunity to speak with several other TOY awardees and I've found their insight and expertise to be amazing. I would love to have you fill the spot for [XXXX] County!

I know what a difficult time this can be working in schools, so I want to clarify what I'm asking. What I would be looking for is one Zoom interview only, scheduled at your convenience. I expect the interview will last 45-60 minutes. At the end of the interview, after you get a better sense of the research project, I would ask you to email any parts of your TOY application that would be relevant to our discussion. My research questions are: 1) What is the stance that exemplary teachers take toward district mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of district-adopted commercial programs in reading and mathematics?; and 2) What leadership attitudes and practices around implementation fidelity and professional developmental opportunities can contribute to increased teacher efficacy and improved student outcomes? If you decide to participate, I would email you my interview questions in advance. If you have any more questions, I'd be happy to answer them. If you'd like to schedule an interview, click

[[hyperlink to Calendly](#)] for options - if you need options beyond those listed, I can certainly work to accommodate your schedule.

Thank you again - I hope to hear from you soon!

Anita Hopkins

Ed.D candidate

University of Maine

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent for Participants

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Anita Hopkins, a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. The faculty sponsor for this project is Dr. Ian Mette, Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Maine. The purpose of the study will be to examine practices of exemplary K-8 teachers regarding their pedagogical practices and instructional decision-making and will explore how those practices and decisions relate to fidelity to commercial programs and teacher perceptions of autonomy and self-efficacy. The study will further serve to inform leadership practices regarding fidelity of implementation of commercial instructional programs and the design of professional development opportunities that prioritize student learning.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by the researcher. These interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will take about 45-60 minutes to complete. To aid with transcription, the interview will be recorded if you agree to do so, or can be conducted using notes only if you choose not to be recorded. You will also be asked to share your Maine Teacher of the Year application packet with the researcher.

Some sample interview questions are:

- How does your district communicate expectations around implementing district-adopted commercial programs with fidelity? What are those expectations and how do you interpret them?

- What are your pedagogical considerations when modifying commercial programs? In what ways do your modifications help lead to student success?

Upon transcription of the interview, you will be emailed the transcript to allow you to review it and check it for accuracy.

Risks

Except for your time and inconvenience, there are minimal risks to you from participating in this study. Responses to interview questions will be aggregated to help mitigate the risk of individual respondents being identified. In the event that direct quotes are included in the final dissertation report, quotes will exclude identifying factors. You may skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, and you may discontinue your participation at any time.

Benefits

While this study will have no direct benefit to you, this research will potentially help shape instructional and leadership practices in the field of education. This study will add to the body of educational research that informs practices which merge scripted curriculum resources with responsive instructional practices that encourage teachers to exercise professional judgment to optimize outcomes for all students. The study will also inform educational leadership practices regarding policy creation and professional development design related to implementation of commercial programs. Your status as an exemplary teacher will give weight to the conclusions that result from the study.

Confidentiality

This study is confidential. The interviews will be conducted via Zoom. If recorded, the interviews will be transcribed by Zoom. Zoom recordings will be downloaded to a password protected computer and deleted off Zoom within 72 hours of the interview. Downloaded

recordings will be deleted when transcriptions are completed, in all cases by July of 2023.

Transcripts and digital notes will be saved indefinitely on a password protected computer.

Handwritten notes, as well as Maine Teacher of the Year application packets, will be stored indefinitely in a locked file belonging to the primary investigator.

Responses to interview questions will be aggregated to reduce the risk of individual respondents being identified. Individual responses to interview questions will preserve confidentiality as much as possible by excluding additional identifying factors. In the event that direct quotes are included in the final dissertation report, quotes will exclude identifying factors.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at 207-592-8097 or by email at anita.hopkins@maine.edu. You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study at ian.mette@maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207/581-2657 (or e-mail umric@maine.edu).

APPENDIX D: Confirmation Script

Confirmation Email for Participants

Hi [First Name],

I'm very much looking forward to meeting with you tomorrow! To give you a bit more context to our conversation, the research questions that I'm exploring are:

- 1) What is the stance that exemplary teachers take toward district mandates regarding fidelity of implementation of district-adopted commercial programs in reading and/or mathematics?; and,
- 2) What leadership attitudes and practices around implementation fidelity and professional developmental opportunities can contribute to increased teacher efficacy and improved student outcomes?

I've attached the interview questions below, and I will be sending you a calendar invite following this email. That invite will include the Zoom link.

Thank you,

Anita

APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

PREAMBLE

- Thank you for your time in talking with me today.
- Introductions
- Purpose of today's discussion:
 - I am interviewing several exemplary K-8 teachers throughout the state to get their perspectives on mandates around fidelity of implementation of commercial literacy and math programs.
 - My goal is to determine the ways in which such fidelity practices impact teachers' ability to respond to student needs.
 - I hope to use the results of my research to inform leadership practices throughout the state, leading to policy and professional development decisions that support responsive instructional practices.
- Ground rules for today's discussion:
 - Are you comfortable with me recording today's discussion?
 - If the discussion is recorded: I will use the recording solely to help me take detailed notes and to document direct quotes that may ultimately be used when I write my dissertation. After review of the recording and completion of my notes, the recording will be deleted.
 - If the discussion is not recorded: I may need to pause throughout our conversation to complete my notes or ask you to repeat statements so that I record them accurately.

- The general information you share and specific statements you make may appear in future reports or presentations. However, your name will not be used and no personally identifiable information, other than the fact that participants are all Maine County Teachers of the Year, will be used.
- I encourage you to speak openly and honestly so that I can develop and represent a complete picture of the impact of fidelity mandates on instructional practices and on student achievement and success.
- You may direct that something be kept “off the record” at any point during our discussion. In that case, I will not take notes and the relevant portion of our interview will be kept confidential.
- Once I have transcribed our interview, the transcription will be sent to you so that you may check it for clarity and provide feedback for any necessary corrections.

APPENDIX F: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

The following questions were included in a semi-structured interview format. Follow-up questions specific to individual responses were also included as relevant.

- Tell me a little about yourself and your experience so far in education.
- Does your district require you to teach certain district-adopted content area programs with fidelity? If so, what content areas apply?
- How does your district communicate expectations around implementing district-adopted commercial programs with fidelity? What are those expectations and how do you interpret them?
- What do you think the strengths of these types of programs are? How do you modify them to best meet the needs of students?
- In your opinion, what are some of the most important factors to consider when a district implements a commercial program – as far as PD and expectations around implementation?
- In what ways do you feel that student needs in the wake of COVID-19 impact the consideration or relevance of fidelity mandates? Do they become more necessary or less necessary?
- What are your pedagogical considerations when modifying commercial programs? How do your modifications help lead to student success?
 - What are some of the modifications you make – things that are not specifically addressed in the program?

- What are your strategies for addressing the diverse needs of learners and ensuring that all learners feel a sense of belonging in being able to access instruction in personally relevant ways?
 - What factors have influenced your instructional decision-making?
 - How do you meet the needs of students and their lived experiences, and how might you modify prepackaged curriculum resources to meet their academic needs?
- How do you collect evidence that students have met daily learning targets, and what do you do when they don't meet them?
- In what ways are the messages you receive from your building administrator around fidelity of implementation aligned with the messages you receive from central office administrators?
- In what ways does your district support, or fail to support, teachers in responsive teaching practices, that is, adjusting instruction to respond to the needs of all students?
- What are the leadership practices and beliefs that you feel would best support teachers in growing their skills to respond to the needs of students within the parameters around expectations of adherence to program implementation? Bullet points for leaders?

That's it for questions – discuss relevant application materials.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Anita Hopkins is a life-long resident of Maine with over 38 years of experience in elementary education, including almost 30 years as a teacher. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Southern Maine with a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education, with minors in Mathematics and Learning Disabilities. As a teacher, Anita served on several district committees, including those involving curriculum, proficiency-based education, gifted and talented education, response to intervention (RTI) systems, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), teacher supervision and evaluation, and reporting and grading systems. She was a member of the Maine Department of Education Learning Results Steering Committee, the NASA Goddard Maine Teacher Institute, and the Governor's Academy for Science Education Leadership, as well as recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching in the area of elementary mathematics. Anita received her Master of Science degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine before becoming a school administrator. She has participated in Maine's Education Leaders Experience and the Transformational Leaders' Network, and is currently the principal of a K-5 school in the midcoast region of Maine. Anita is a candidate for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine in May 2024.