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# A Conversation Too Late: An Examination of Early-Career Teachers' Experiences With New Social Studies Standards

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## Abstract

Research suggests that when teachers do not support education policy or there is incoherence and inconsistency in teachers' interpretation of policy, it is unlikely that policy will be implemented with fidelity and/or lead to desired impacts. As more states revise their social studies standards in ways that emphasize inquiry and disciplinary thinking, the ambitious pedagogy articulated within those documents will only be realized if individual teachers choose to reflect upon and alter their practice. This qualitative study examined how four early-career middle/secondary social studies teachers perceived and implemented the 2019 South Carolina Social Studies College- and Career-Ready Standards. Findings revealed support for the instructional vision of the standards tempered by concerns about their preparedness to fulfill that vision. Teachers' engagement in professional learning influenced their perception and implementation of the standards. Evidence from this study suggest actions teacher educators, school leaders, and individual teachers can take to ensure more successful enactment of the 2019 Standards and similar reforms.

**Keywords:** content standards, social studies, early-career teachers

Anyone who has spent time in a teachers lounge or faculty meeting has heard animated chatter about education reform. Sometimes the conversation conveys enthusiastic support for new initiatives. Other times the conversation expresses frustration over additional, unreasonable demands. School reform efforts are often conceived by people outside the classroom, but the degree to which they are implemented ultimately comes down to teachers. Teachers are curricular and instructional gatekeepers (Thornton, 2005), and research suggests that when teachers do not support policy or there is incoherence and inconsistency in teachers' interpretation of policy, it is unlikely that policy will be implemented with fidelity and/or lead to desired impacts (e.g., Spillane, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2010).

The introduction of new content standards is a valuable opportunity to examine policy implementation, especially if the proposed standards significantly alter educational structures and expectations. South Carolina adopted the Social Studies College- and Career-Ready Standards in 2019 (hereafter referred to as 2019 Standards), which illustrate a substantial shift in social studies curriculum and instruction, both through the inclusion of new courses (e.g., middle-level geography course) and the centering of disciplinary skills and inquiry. Effective implementation of these standards requires considerable change, which can prove difficult for teachers whose personal philosophy or pedagogical preferences may not align with the vision in the standards. This article explores how middle and secondary social studies teachers perceived and implemented the 2019 Standards. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings:

1. Teachers believed the 2019 Standards' focus on skill and perceived flexibility have the potential to improve student engagement and learning; however, they felt overwhelmed by the degree of change and choice.
2. Many teachers did not receive significant training on the 2019 Standards and had to advocate for support and guidance.
3. The differences among teachers' interpretations and access to professional learning opportunities manifested in varied approaches to implementing the 2019 Standards

Evidence from this study suggest actions teacher educators, school leaders, and individual teachers can take to ensure more successful enactment of the 2019 Standards and similar reforms.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed by *zones of enactment*, which Spillane (1999) defined as “the space in which [teachers make] sense of, and operationalize for their own practice, the ideas advanced by reformers” (p. 159). Spillane identified six external factors that influence enactment: policy sector, professional sector, pupils, public, and private sector (p. 164). The intersection of external and personal factors (e.g., prior knowledge, interpretation of reform language) further shape enactment. Spillane placed “personal resources” at the center of the model, claiming enactment only occurs if teachers “notice opportunities for learning...and such noticing is not automatic” (p. 169). Spillane also emphasized the importance of collegial collaboration to enactment, suggesting ongoing investigation, practice, and reflection were essential to “get beyond surface dimension of practice” (p. 161). This study aimed to investigate the ways in which participants mobilized personal and external resources and how those factors influenced participants' enactment of the 2019 Standards.

### **Literature Review**

Teachers encounter numerous reform initiatives during their careers. Whether a school-wide instructional technology program, a state-mandated assessment, or a national push to revitalize civic education, teachers are continuously engaged in some degree of education reform. The introduction of new content standards is an important way to examine policy enactment because they, theoretically, prompt large groups of teachers to reflect upon and significantly alter their practice. Content standards often reflect contemporary philosophical, social, and pedagogical debates about education. Throughout the Twentieth Century, expectations for social studies oscillated between those who envisioned a curriculum built around relevant, multidisciplinary problems and those who desired a curriculum rooted in more narrow facts and skills (Evans, 2004). More recently, state legislatures and school districts around the country are fervently debating “critical race theory” and the inclusion of race, gender, and social justice more broadly in curriculum (Pollock et al., 2022). In some cases, these debates may not influence the eventual standards document but may still influence teachers' attitudes about the standards. In others, these debates may spur a dramatic change in standards, which undoubtedly spurs reflection and adaptation from teachers. The standards initiatives discussed below reflect significant shifts in instructional expectations that resulted from some stakeholders' demands for more rigor and accountability.

### ***Common Core State Standards***

Following the release of the Common Core State Standards (hereafter referred to as CCSS) in 2010, multiple studies examined teachers' perceptions of the CCSS and its implementation, concluding that teachers' perceptions of the CCSS were influenced by grade level, experience level, and self-efficacy (e.g., Matlock et al., 2016; Troia & Graham, 2017); teachers' confidence with implementing the CCSS differed across contexts (e.g., Davis et al., 2017; Martinie et al., 2016); and feelings of marginalization influenced teachers' attitudes and actions toward the CCSS (e.g., Endacott et al., 2015; Martinie et al., 2016).

Martinie et al.'s (2016) narrative analysis of high school math teachers' implementation of the CCSS revealed four zones of enactment (p. 661-664). Hardcore Adopters believed the CCSS aligned with their personal philosophy of mathematics instruction and would improve their pedagogy. They were vocal advocates of the benefits of the CCSS and worked to aid their colleagues' transition to the new standards. Anxious Adopters wanted to believe in the potential of the CCSS but were overwhelmed by the expectations it presented for students and the instructional changes it required. Cautious Adopters went along with district's implementation efforts but were confused by the language of the CCSS and doubted if the CCSS would improve students' experiences. Critical Adopters viewed the CCSS as another poorly-conceived initiative crafted by people unfamiliar with classroom realities. They did not believe the CCSS would positively impact student learning and, in some cases, had no intention to revise their practice in response the CCSS.

Even though many teachers from the studies discussed above reported participating in CCSS-related professional development, few were satisfied with its quantity or quality (e.g., Davis et al., 2017; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2013; Troia & Graham, 2017). Investigations into the implementation of CCSS emphasized that administrators cannot assume teachers are aware of, feel positively about, or are committed to content standards. Successful implementation requires administrators to consider the diverse attitudes and needs of teachers and design professional development that meets teachers where they are.

### ***Social Studies Standards***

Considering the reputation of social studies as a fact-driven curriculum, several studies have focused on the enactment of ambitious practice *despite* standards (e.g., Grant & Gradwell, 2010; Heafner & Norwood, 2019), but with the publication of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (NCSS, 2013) and subsequent revision of social studies standards in many states (see New et al., 2021), the current landscape is one in which the enactment of state social studies standards *should* mean the enactment of ambitious practice, notably inquiry. As with the CCSS, teachers convey varying levels of commitment and preparedness to implement inquiry. Thacker et al. (2016) found that middle and secondary social studies teachers can define inquiry but are not effectively integrating it into instruction. Teachers supported the ideas in the *C3 Framework* but needed substantial support and professional development to shift their instructional practices. Mueller's (2018a, 2018b) examination of secondary social studies teachers' conceptions of compelling questions found that teachers may interpret core concepts within standards documents differently, which ultimately impacts their implementation of standards. van Hover et al. (2016) found that teachers may interpret standards documents in ways that promote limited and prescribed curriculum, especially if the standards are paired with high-stakes assessments. They argued that teachers must be prepared to

approach policy documents more critically and exercise their autonomy to “make the standards ‘better’, broader, and more coherent” (p. 57).

### ***Early Career Teachers***

Several studies have identified the unique experiences of early-career teachers regarding enactment of education reform. Early-career teachers tended to express a more positive view of the CCSS (Matlock et al., 2016) and were more open to change (Zhang, 2014). The early-career teachers in Martinie et al.’s (2016) study tended to be Anxious Adopters who demonstrated a positive attitude but were full of questions. Zhang (2014) concluded that early-career teachers had difficulty interpreting the CCSS but believed their confusion would lessen with time and experience, though some complained about the expectation to “go forth and teach” (p. 472) without sufficient training.

Early-career social studies teachers have expressed similar challenges implementing ambitious pedagogy. van Hover et al. (2007) found early-career teachers could define historical thinking but could not elucidate how to incorporate historical thinking into their instruction. Martell (2020) found early-career teachers believed in the value of inquiry-based instruction but struggled to implement it in their classrooms because they lacked practical tools. In both studies, the teachers were often too preoccupied with other challenges commonly faced by new teachers.

### **Significance of the Study**

South Carolina implemented the 2019 Standards in Fall 2021, following a two-year bridge period. The state’s social studies standards had not been revised since 2011, and the 2019 Standards represent a significant change from the previous document, both in how courses are organized and the emphasis on inquiry-based instruction and disciplinary skills. This study sought to examine how early career teachers are reacting to the 2019 Standards, specifically:

1. How do they perceive the 2019 Standards?
2. How are they learning about the 2019 Standards?
3. How are they implementing the 2019 Standards?

Whereas several studies have examined teachers’ adjustments to new standards through surveys and other single-point-in-time measurements, this study took a longitudinal approach in hopes of capturing if/how teachers’ views and needs change over time. The literature suggests professional development is more effective when it is sustained and targeted (e.g., Desimone, 2009), and longitudinal data may indicate ways in which professional development efforts should evolve over the course of an academic year or professional career. Additionally, this study focused on the experiences of early-career teachers, who are handling this change in tandem with other challenges typically faced by beginning teachers. Considering the forthcoming wave of teacher retirements, it is especially important to understand the experiences of early-career teachers so teacher preparation and induction programs can respond in ways that increase the likelihood of teacher excellence and retention.

### **Methods**

This study followed a qualitative research design (Yin, 2016) and was informed by phenomenological principles. Phenomenology attempts to understand the lived experience as described

by the participants (Creswell, 2009) in order to “construct an animating, evocative, description of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 19). Through this year-long study, I strove to listen closely to the four participating teachers in order to effectively relay their unique experiences and identify common themes that emerged.

### ***Participants and Teaching Context***

Four social studies teachers (two middle and two secondary) from four different public schools in three different school districts in South Carolina participated in the study. All four are early-career teachers, defined as less than five years of experience. I recruited teachers using a purposeful sampling method (Patton, 1990). Because the study required several in-depth interviews, selection was informed by my working relationship with participants. I originally approached these four participants because they historically taught different social studies subjects and could speak to course-specific aspects of the 2019 Standards (e.g., teaching a brand new course, teaching a state-assessed course); however, 2020-2021 course assignments were different than expected for select participants. These four participants served as information-rich cases (Glesne, 2011) who would “most likely illuminate” (Yin, 2009, p. 26) my research questions. Table 1 provides additional information about the participants and their teaching contexts.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Profiles*

Name	Grade Level	Subject(s) Taught	Experience
Chipper	Secondary	Geography; Govt/Econ; World History	2
Elizabeth	Middle	South Carolina History	4
Mark	Secondary	Geography; Govt/Econ; Emt. Studies	3
Sandy	Middle	Geography	2

*Note.* Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

It is important to note the impact of COVID-19 on participants and their teaching contexts. The 2019 Standards were approved by the state legislature in Spring 2019 and originally scheduled for full implementation in Fall 2020. Schools could choose to continue teaching the 2011 Standards or move to the 2019 Standards during the 2019-2020 bridge period. In light of the additional challenges of teaching in a pandemic, the bridge period was extended a year, meaning schools were not expected to fully implement the 2019 Standards until Fall 2021. Participants’ teaching schedules were also impacted by COVID-19. Sandy historically taught Geography and was assigned to teach this course in 2020-2021, but a few days before the school year began she was re-assigned to virtual instruction and responsible for teaching all subjects to 7<sup>th</sup> graders participating in her school’s virtual academy. Mark also had virtual instruction responsibilities in 2020-2021, which he had to balance with his in-person course load.



### ***Data Sources***

Interviews served as the primary data source for this study. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each teacher at four points in the 2020-2021 academic year: August, November, February, May. Each interview was conducted using Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interview 1 explored their approach to teaching, their school context, their initial impressions of the 2019 Standards, and their expectations for the forthcoming year. Interviews 2, 3, and 4 followed a similar structure of reflecting on challenges and successes since the last interview, follow-up questions related to topics from previous interviews, and specific steps they had taken to learn more about and implement the 2019 Standards. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy. In May, each participant completed a “Standards Timeline” on which teachers summarized steps they took to familiarize themselves with the 2019 Standards at seven points in time (Spring 2019, Summer 2019, Fall 2019, Spring 2020, Summer 2020, Fall 2020, Spring 2021). Teachers were asked to describe when they first learned about the 2019 Standards, informal and formal professional development experiences, collegial collaborations, and school/district supports.

### ***Data Analysis***

Throughout the study I took intentional steps to analyze my observations for meaning (Glesne, 2011), primarily through researcher memos that captured my reflections, questions, and research decisions. The memos also informed subsequent interview topics. At the conclusion of data gathering, I employed a five-phase approach common to qualitative studies: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Yin, 2016). Using an open coding process (Glesne, 2011), I examined the data generated by a single participant in three waves. On first pass, I noted key phrases. On second pass, I coded data as guided by the three subquestions – perceptions, professional learning, implementation. On third pass, I compared interview data to the participant’s timeline and updated the three main categories. I then compiled categorical data, which I further analyzed to identify major themes. Data were re-examined within and across interviews, participants, and themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I also crafted thematic memos that allowed me to better articulate the properties of each theme (Seidman, 2006).

Several steps were taken to improve trustworthiness. I participated in “prolonged engagement” with the teachers (Yin, 2016, p. 86). I conducted member-checking (Glesne, 2011) by sharing summaries from previous interviews and asking participants to confirm or revise my conclusions. To address content validity, two secondary social studies teachers not involved in the study reviewed the Timeline template prior to dissemination (Creswell, 2009).

## **Findings**

Content standards are designed to encourage some degree of consistency across the student experience, which is complicated by the personal nature of policy enactment. In what follows I discuss how teachers perceived the 2019 Standards, were learning about the 2019 Standards, and were implementing the 2019 Standards. What emerges is a common desire to live up to the ambitious tenets of the 2019 Standards but differences in readiness for and openness to significant changes to their practice.

### ***How do they perceive the 2019 standards?***

Teachers communicated positive perceptions of the 2019 Standards but with varied degrees of enthusiasm. Descriptions of their first impressions ranged from “I don’t have a problem with them” (Elizabeth, Interview 1) to “I love them” (Sandy, Interview 1). Teachers liked the focus on disciplinary skills and inquiry as well as the flexibility and choice they perceived in the 2019 Standards. Teachers saw the potential of these aspects to improve student engagement and learning. Chipper explained, “I think that gives teachers a little more freedom because they can give that student choice” (Interview 1).

Teachers’ enthusiasm for the 2019 Standards was countered by uncertainty as to what these changes mean for practice. They were unsure how to begin revising their instruction and felt overwhelmed by the degree of change. Sandy said that even though she found the “flexibility awesome” that “it’s overwhelming to have to choose” (Interview 1). Chipper attributed some of his concern to his lack of experience, “I feel it’s my role to guide [students] along the right path and in the right direction, and sometimes I feel, as a new teacher, I don’t know what that right direction is” (Interview 3).

Elizabeth also desired affirmation and clearer expectations,

I know this is all this content information. This is what you want me to teach. I just think it’s just how should it be implemented. If you want students to know this, if you’re trying to get to this end goal, what’s my part in getting them to the end goal (Interview 4).

Teachers said the degree to which the content changed influenced how overwhelmed teachers felt, with Sandy and Elizabeth noting that their 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade colleagues, whose courses were significantly revised, were struggling the most. These teachers demonstrated the potential for educators to support the values and visions of a standards document while also feeling unprepared to make the changes they believe will positively impact student learning.

### ***How are they learning about the 2019 standards?***

The findings revealed a significant disparity in participants’ knowledge of the 2019 Standards. Sandy represented one extreme, having attended multiple professional development workshops led by the South Carolina Department of Education and served on curriculum-writing teams. Mark represented the other extreme. He could not offer a clear assessment of the 2019 Standards until our last interview, citing limited time and opportunity to investigate the document. Elizabeth and Chipper had working knowledge of the 2019 Standards, but, as discussed below, this was not necessarily the product of intentional preparation offered by their schools and districts.

Teachers were often left to their own devices and had to advocate for support and guidance from administration. Sandy recounted an incident from her job interview when she learned her principal and school leadership were unaware the social studies standards were changing,

One of my first questions was which standards are we going off of...I was the only one who knew that there were new standards. It was kind of interesting to see how things like standards, new standards, can get lost in education. It that seems like pretty important information that a school would be aware of, but nobody knew. (Interview 1)

Because Sandy worked with the 2019 Standards in her teacher preparation program, she became a de facto trainer at her school - as a first year teacher.

Elizabeth’s administrators were aware of the 2019 Standards and appointed Elizabeth to a curriculum writing team tasked with developing support materials, but she said they received no training on the new document, “No one came in and said ‘this is what this is.’ It was, ‘hey, just look at it and get together and make something’” (Interview 1). She indicated recent interactions on her Instagram account were a more significant influence on her professional learning, “I had somebody just send me a message...they worked with the state of South Carolina creating units, inquiry units on these standards, so she shared those with me and pointed me to those. So we've been looking at that” (Interview 1). Elizabeth acknowledged gaps in her understanding and even reached out to administration for more support, with little success,

We’ve talked with [the assistant principle] a little bit about the standards and how we feel like we didn’t know things, and he was just like “Oh, well. That kinda sucks. Sorry. We can maybe try to figure something out”. That hasn't really happened. (Interview 2)

Elizabeth’s and Sandy’s commitment to their professional learning is commendable, but it is disappointing that teachers did not mention intentional actions taken by their departments, schools, or districts to prepare them for 2019 Standards implementation during the entire 2020-2021 academic year.

Although the teachers had not received substantial support, they had clear opinions about the forms they believed it should take. Teachers expressed preference for school-level professional development. For Chipper, this approach during training he attended in the 2019-2020 academic year provided a level of comfort that allowed him to be more honest,

I was in a setting that I knew, not some random auditorium somewhere with people I didn't know, and being a new teacher, especially last year, that was really helpful that I didn't have to worry about not looking smart or being afraid to ask a question in front of a group. (Interview 4)

Teachers were critical of past one-size-fits-all professional development, especially school or district initiatives that seemed irrelevant to social studies, so they believed support should be flexible and personalized. According to Elizabeth, teachers usually know what they need but need help getting started, so administrators should “personally ask the question and don't try to put me through something that's maybe generic, for everybody. Just more, let's follow up, this is what we see, is what we have, here are some resources” (Interview 4). Sandy, who demonstrated the deepest understanding of the 2019 Standards, emphasized this process takes time and collaboration, “A lot of reflection was probably the best teacher of the standards for me...It took a lot of meetings for me to understand it” (Interview 1).

Teachers also expressed a desire for instructional examples but were not equally aware of existing resources. Prior to the 2020-2021 academic year, the South Carolina Department of Education posted Alignment Guides and Sample Units on their website. During 2020-2021, a series of informational videos were added to the website. Sandy was familiar with these resources, and Elizabeth encountered them through her social media, but neither Chipper nor Mark knew about them. This may be a product of limited desire to take responsibility for professional learning, but it is important to acknowledge the unique challenges teachers encountered in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More pressing issues often took precedence. As Chipper explained, for many teachers, the 2019 Standards were “out of sight, out of mind” (Interview 4). Teachers mentioned their schools intentionally

limited professional development and focused on issues related to technology and virtual learning; however, the absence of professional development about the 2019 Standards may have left those teachers trying to prepare for implementation feeling isolated and others woefully underprepared. As example, Elizabeth said her administration's delayed response to her request for help was "a conversation too late just because at that point, it's like, I've figured it out to an extent or I've said 'this is what I'm doing and we'll just kind of roll with it'" (Interview 4).

### ***How are they implementing the 2019 standards?***

Schools were not required to implement the 2019 Standards until the 2021-2022 academic year, but some schools opted to transition as early as Fall 2019. The participants represent schools that transitioned at different speeds and with different levels of commitment. Though Sandy said her administration was unaware of the 2019 Standards until her interview, her school implemented the standards in 2019-2020. Chipper's school implemented the 2019 Standards in select subjects (e.g., Human Geography) in 2019-2020 with plans to implement the standards across the curriculum in 2020-2021; however, Chipper said the school opted to return to the old U.S. History standards "to ensure U.S. History [state test] scores would not plummet" (Standards Timeline). Elizabeth and her colleagues voiced their preference to stick with the old standards until 2021-2022, but her school administration made the decision to implement the 2019 Standards in 2020-2021. Mark's school waited to implement the 2019 Standards until 2021-2022.

Despite the variety in implementation timing, all schools had substantial time to prepare for the transition. Teachers said much of the bridge period was dedicated to departmental efforts to "align" the 2019 Standards with previous standards. Mark explained,

We had a spreadsheet or chart where we had the unit that we standardly teach...and then we had the new standards, and we had to see where that was covered....It was a lot of stretch of making things align just to have the box filled. (Interview 1)

In many cases, the alignment process focused on identifying areas where content overlapped, with less attention paid to the integration of skill or inquiry, which are emphasized in the 2019 Standards. This may be because teachers' instruction already centers disciplinary skills or because teachers struggled to shift their conception of curriculum from content-focused to skill-focused or because the more teachers could "retro fit" (Chipper, Interview 1) their instruction, the less change they must endure. Teachers did not communicate departmental intentions to use the 2019 Standards as impetus to re-envision the curriculum

The focus on content influenced implementation on the individual level as well. If teachers did not perceive significant changes to the content, they also did not anticipate significant pedagogical change. When asked about how the 2019 Standards would influence her instruction, Elizabeth explained, "Our standards didn't really change. We're still teaching the same content.... I think a lot of similar lesson plans, lesson ideas that I've done with the older standards, because, like I said, ours just fit right back in" (Interview 1). Sandy believed the focus on content reflected a misunderstanding of the 2019 Standards, which might lead to misapplication of the document. She said,

A lot of the teachers are taking it as “I have to cover all this information” and the number one thing I’ve ever said to somebody is, “you don’t have to cover all this information.” That’s the whole point of it, is you don’t have to cover all this content. But you do have to create lessons that are diving deep into concepts. (Interview 3)

Elizabeth represents another way that focus on content might hinder implementation. The indicators within the 2019 Standards are built around “Deconstructed Skills” and do not present the content in chronological fashion. This was very confusing for Elizabeth, who was accustomed to approaching a standards document in linear fashion (e.g., teach indicator 1.1, followed by 1.2). She believed the old standards “flowed, time wise” whereas the 2019 Standards “goes backwards in time and then jumps back forward and goes backwards and jumps forward” (Interview 1). She assumed she had to teach the Indicators in order and struggled with how that would impact her practice, “If I’m gonna teach something, why would I talk about ‘Yeah, we have our colonists. They’re coming into America; they’re taking over land; they’re taking it from Native Americans. Who are they? Well, we’ll talk about them later.’” (Interview 1). Elizabeth assumed the 2019 Standards would reflect the chronological organization of the previous standards, and her struggle to shake that preconception caused confusion and anxiety.

Professional learning, or lack thereof, also shaped implementation. The many trainings Sandy attended inspired her to teach geography thematically instead of regionally. Through personal exploration and our conversations, Elizabeth eventually recognized the 2019 Standards did not have to be taught in the order listed, but a more powerful example of the influence of professional learning was Elizabeth’s discovery of sample units, which reshaped her perception and implementation of the 2019 Standards. She said, “That changed the way I was teaching. Before that, I was just more ‘OK, this is what I see the standard says. I know what the old standards used to say. How do they compare?’” (Interview 4). The sample units provided Elizabeth much-needed clarity and the confidence to “start to do something different from the original stuff. I felt ‘hey, you know I could probably do this right now’” (Interview 4).

### **Discussion**

Education policy does not implement itself. Policy is enacted by teachers, whose attempts to “[make] sense of, and operationalize” (Spillane, 1999, p. 159) reforms are shaped by their willingness to “question, unlearn, and discard much of their current, deeply-rooted understandings” (p. 154). These four teachers reflect how one’s approach to this challenging work is influenced by professional development, collaboration with colleagues, administrative support, teaching experience, and personal dispositions.

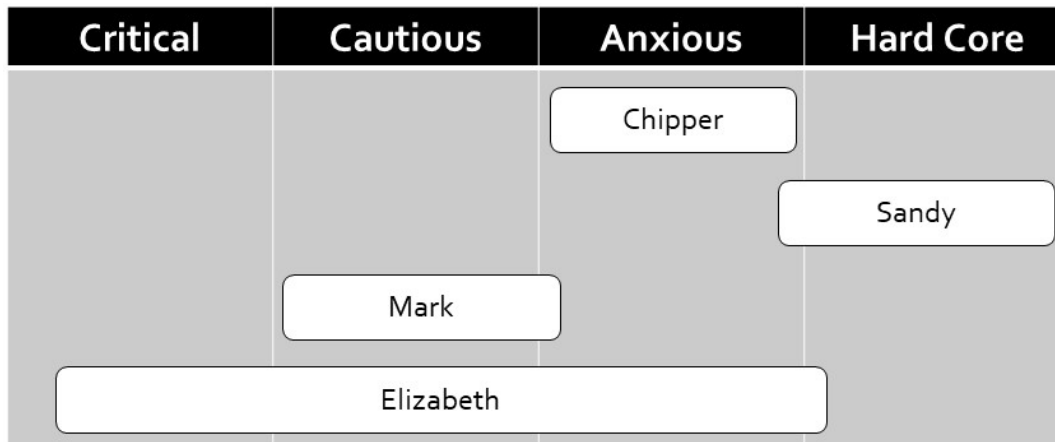
As the literature predicted, the participants were familiar with the 2019 Standards and held a relatively positive view of them; however, they felt unprepared to implement the standards and desired additional professional development. All had access to resources provided by the South Carolina State Department of Education, but their willingness to engage with those supports depended on their personal resources, notably the urgency they felt to adapt and the time they had to focus on upcoming changes, which was particularly difficult due to COVID-19. Those who did take advantage of professional development were most significantly impacted by opportunities that emphasized collaboration and deliberation, which were harder to find during the 2020-2021 academic year due to reductions in formal

professional learning activities. Fewer opportunities for collective sense-making, experimentation, and reflection led to greater feelings of confusion and complacency.

The literature suggests that early-career teachers are more receptive to educational reform. Martinie et al. (2016) found that early-career teachers tended to be Anxious Adopters who felt positively about new standards but were full of questions. This was true of each participant, but application of Martinie et al.'s categories reveal how fluid the zone of enactment can be among novice educators (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Participants' Zones of Enactment*



*Note.* Categories derived from Martinie et al. (2016).

Chipper is most fully categorized as an Anxious Adopter. He was hopeful that the 2019 Standards would positively improve social studies teaching and learning but was unsure about how to implement them and heavily reliant on others to guide his professional learning. Though Sandy expressed desire to deepen her understanding of the 2019 Standards, she displays more characteristics of a Hard Core Adopter, notably her firm belief that the 2019 Standards reflect necessary changes in social studies instruction and the responsibility she has taken to train herself and others. For most of the year, Mark displayed traits of a Cautious Adopter, feeling limited urgency to learn about or implement the 2019 Standards, but he eventually communicated positive perceptions and a commitment to engage in more professional learning. Elizabeth demonstrated elements of each enactment zone. She initially communicated a desire to continue using old materials and to implement the 2019 Standards to the degree she thought best, which reflect the Critical Adopter. Over time, Elizabeth expressed positive perceptions of the 2019 Standards but needed greater clarity on her role in fulfilling their intentions, which reflect the Cautious Adopter. By the time Elizabeth found the sample units, she expressed a better understanding of the intentions of the 2019 Standards and openness to altering her instruction but desired greater support, which reflect the Anxious Adopter. By the end of the year, Elizabeth had implemented some of the sample units and planned to recommend that her 8<sup>th</sup> Grade colleagues use the sample units as the foundation for their planning moving forward, which reflect the Hard Core Adopter.

Access to timely, high-quality professional support seemed to influence each participant's enactment zone. Sandy took advantage of many opportunities, both those presented to her and those she sought out. She positioned herself as an engaged leader, and even though she communicated some initial

nerves, she quickly developed into a vocal advocate for the 2019 Standards. Chipper had access to professional development but tended to rely on his more experienced colleagues to take the lead and do the work. Preparing for the 2019 Standards did not appear to be a priority at Mark's school, so he was not motivated to reflect or act. Elizabeth's progression across the zones of enactment aligned with her professional learning. Though driven by her own efforts, Elizabeth transitioned from doubting the 2019 Standards to seeing their potential to dramatically altering her instruction. As Spillane (1999) suggested, these teachers demonstrate that without "individual capacity to appreciate the core reform ideas and access to rich array of social and material resources to support their learning, external reform initiatives alone are unlikely to bring about substantial changes in the core of practice" (p. 171).

Though all four participants are early-career teachers, it is interesting that the teachers most clearly categorized as Critical or Cautious Adopters had more experience (3-4 years) than the teachers most clearly categorized as Anxious or Hard Core Adopters (2 years). That may be a reflection of experience with the 2011 standards. Elizabeth and Mark began their careers under the old document, so the 2019 Standards mark a significant shift occurring at a time when, as new teachers, they are still learning to "be a teacher" and may lack professional confidence. It also suggests that hesitancy toward reform manifests quickly.

These trends suggest the sociology of education may be a useful lens for future analysis. This study focused on individual teachers, but the data indicate their perceptions and actions are influenced by interactions (or lack thereof) with colleagues, educational leaders, and structures that shape professional learning. Woulfin (2019) applied an occupational perspective to examine the macro, meso, and micro factors that influence how different educator roles (e.g., instructional coach) enact policy reform. Woulfin's argument that teachers' approaches are influenced by, for example, standardized assessments (macro), social learning opportunities (meso), and prior experiences (micro) are reflected by these participants. Chipper explained his department's return to the old standards because of anxiety about the end-of-course exam. Elizabeth's openness to instructional change was spurred by interactions in online communities. Sandy's introduction to the 2019 Standards during college contributed to her confidence in leading her school's transition. Considering the distinct approaches among the participants, one might also consider how the interactions among occupations (e.g., working with a clued-in v. clueless principal) and organizational factors (e.g., district mandated professional development) shape enactment.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There are limitations to this study. The data were based on self-reports of a small sample of teachers, and the working relationship I had with the teachers may have influenced their candidness. Additionally, COVID-19 influenced the 2020-2021 academic year in numerous ways, including an unexpected extension of the bridge period, and it is difficult to discern the degree to which pandemic-related stressors impacted teachers' perception and implementation of the 2019 Standards. Nonetheless, evidence from this study suggest actions teacher educators, school leaders, and individual teachers can take to ensure more successful enactment of education reforms.

Teacher educators must stay on the forefront of education reform efforts and support teacher candidates in developing the skills to direct their own professional learning and the confidence to take on leadership early. Teacher leaders must advocate for their colleagues (e.g., ensuring adequate time and training).

They often set the tone and trajectory for enactment, especially for early-career teachers who rely heavily on trusted colleagues. School administrators must stay informed and look to develop flexible professional development approaches that allow teachers to personalize their learning, especially with changes that may impact only a subset of teachers (e.g., social studies teachers). Teachers of all experience levels must trust themselves. They must acknowledge their personal responsibility for professional growth but also advocate for themselves, as they might have a deeper understanding of the proposed reform than school leadership. Successful implementation of education reform requires awareness, proactive leadership, and ongoing collaboration among stakeholders. It is important to support teachers over the lifetime of the reform, but structured support leading up to the reform is critical. A conversation too late can spur apathy and confusion, but a well-timed conversation can energize and inspire.

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