IT'S ANOTHER ACRONYM: PBIS, TEACHERS, AND LOCAL POLICY ENACTMENT

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores teacher enactment of education policy, specifically Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), in a large suburban Midwestern high school. Participating educators constructed policy meaning while they sought to understand it, over a multi-year rollout process. Data were gathered using five teacher and one administrator semi-structured interviews. These data were analyzed in part using sense making and critical policy analysis to identify five prevailing themes in teacher experiences around education policy—common sense, norms and expectations, accountability, compliance, and barriers. This study shares both individual and collective narratives to explore how teachers approach top-down policies and affect them through teacher decisions at the ground level. Teacher voice adds to the conversation about the experiences of educators as policy actors, how teachers make sense of new political mandates, and how teachers exercise agency in the classroom. Recommendations that resulted from this study centered on the need for legislators and educational leaders to reenter the voices of teachers as they design policy that governs classroom practices. Participants in this study shared their work as political actors translating federal, state, and local educational policy in order to make it meaningful and applicable for both teachers and students in the classroom. Educational policy will continue to shape the personal and professional world of teachers and the inclusion of teachers at the policy creation stage meets challenges presented by neoliberal accountability policies. The overarching lesson was that teachers must embrace their roles as policy actors and act on the agency they possess as the final step before educational policy reaches students.

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DEDICATION

To my little, but expanding, family: Tom, Daisy, and the Tiny Human, who all kept me company and full of love and wiggles while I wrote this dissertation. Who knew 2023 would be such an important year in Fayhaus?

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers are tasked with many demands throughout the school day—building relationships, creating engaging lessons, providing feedback, answering emails, and keeping grades up to date. Teachers are also tasked with the less visible, but equally demanding, pressure to interpret and enact federal, state, and local education policies. In this study, I explore how teachers at a large midwestern high school grappled with the enactment of a single policy as it evolved from federal vision to state policy, to local mandate. The complicated relationship teachers have with policy, intentional or not, is explored through qualitative research using semi-structured interviews as my methodology. The resulting dialogue and understandings from the interviews were analyzed using Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) and sensemaking as theoretical frameworks to explore how teachers advance or impede education policy generated by top-down political structures.

In their critique of top-down political structures, Datnow and Park (2012) defined educational policies as mandates that establish rules and regulations to encourage compliance at the local level and create large-scale reform changes at the national level. This top-down approach to policy creation at the federal and state levels appears to ignore the influence of local context on implementation while positioning teachers at what Datnow and Park (2012) referred to as the receiving end of an arrow, where teachers and leaders become "passive, pragmatic implementers" (p. 348). Education policy looks different in different places, regardless of how straightforward it appears on paper (Datnow & Park, 2012). Education policy is perhaps the greatest guiding force for the day-to-day structures, culture, and curriculum in classrooms across the United States, which brings needed attention to how these policies play out at the local level and why they should be explored. Datnow and Park (2012) argued that prescriptive remedies for what is troubling schools have shaped federal educational reform for the last several decades, and one could argue that the same may be true for education policy and mandates in the State of Ohio. Many educators, in 2023, may be continuing to face the challenge, at the micro level, of implementing policy in a meaningful, not just obedient, manner (Datnow & Park, 2012).

With sustained focus on education in the political arena, many teachers face discomfort with increased demands that are driven by neoliberal, post-neoliberalism, also known as anti-neoliberalism, and/or bureaucratic accountability practices (Duarte & Brewer, 2019). public

schooling into a marketplace (Apple, 2006; Lakes & Carter, 2011). Prescribed curricula, along with the testing and textbook market, appear to fare particularly well under neoliberal policies that push privatization of schooling and its adjacent services, while deprofessionalizing teachers (Lakes & Carter, 2011). Schooling is frequently seen as a public benefit, but neoliberal policies seek to undermine its benefit for the common good (Lakes & Carter, 2011). Neoliberal policies act on the fears of working- and middle-class families who rightly worry about the futures of their children, and these neoliberal policies gain traction as families begin to embrace an educational agenda that increases productivity and meets future economic needs by removing bureaucratic control and enhancing privatization (Apple, 2006). Apple (2006) argued this line of thinking promoted the neoliberal belief that "what is public is bad and what is private is good" (p. 23).

Ball (2015) argued for exploring these tensions in policy and the effects they create. Political interest in education is not new. In the 1960s and 1970s, federal policies focused on equity and policy initiatives that increased student access to education services (Datnow & Park, 2012). Federal government interest in education expanded in the 1980s and 1990s as policy concerns shifted to focus on standards-based reform. The release of "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) inspired many to question the value of public education. To counter the claims in "A Nation at Risk," Sandia National Laboratories (Carson et al., 1993) released its own study in the early 1990s, analyzing educational funding, dropout rates, and standardized testing, which the authors themselves described as an outsider report aimed at encouraging unbiased, data-based decision-making in education. Carson et al. (1993) found, in their post-"A Nation at Risk" study, that educators viewed themselves as performing an increasingly demanding job with a lack of public support and that non-educators believed educators should be pressured to perform better. The report by Sandia National Laboratories reported a widespread call for education reform but noted conflict in the suggestions (Carson et al., 1993). Local empowerment meant to give parents control over their child's education was seen to be in direct conflict with the call for a national curriculum and standardized testing (Carson et al., 1993). The focus shifted again in the 2000s to large-scale reform, which solidified with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and new levels of accountability. Ali (2019) pointed out that these accountability reforms equate educator effectiveness with test results. NCLB, the first federal framework so focused on accountability, was unprecedented in the

authority it gave to the federal government for education oversight (Datnow & Park, 2012). President Obama embraced two key President Bush accountability-era beliefs, supporting the federal government's role in overcoming the status quo in public schooling and directly holding schools and teachers accountable for improving academic performance for all students (McGuinn, 2016). After Congress failed to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the Obama administration used executive power to push policy change through competitive grant programs including Race to the Top (RTTT) (McGuinn, 2016). This federal expansion led to backlash and the eventual reauthorization of ESEA, known as the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reduced the role of federal government in schooling (McGuinn, 2016). ESSA went into effect with the 2017-2018 school year and still supported accountability, though states were given the power to design their own accountability plans, of which one indicator needed to be non-academic—a point where many states chose to use Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (McGuinn, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

There appears to be an abundance of research about education policies (e.g., Ball, 2016; Brathwaite, 2017; Slavin, 2002), but there also appears to be a lack of studies that address the evolution of such policies as they pass through different stages of the policy process and through the hands of varied actors in the policy arena. Ball (2015) defined policy as a process that is iterative and runs on a feedback loop, as it is ordered and re-ordered. Ball (2015) went on to suggest that, while policy research has focused on what has been said and written, less research has been done to focus on how policy is formed and executed. This gap in research extends to the role of teachers. Much has been written about teachers' lack of agency in accountability-based educational policies (e.g., Biesta et al., 2015; Datnow, 2012, 2020; Robinson, 2012), but less has been done to examine the conscious and unconscious decisions teachers make about policy in their classrooms. Ball (2015) argued that policy is a process of interpretation as school actors enact policy but insisted that teachers must examine ways of thinking and talking about ourselves as policy controls us. This gap challenges our understanding about how teachers toe the line of doing what is mandated by policy versus what is best for students (Duarte & Brewer, 2019). Success of policy enactment is often measured through adherence to policy design, despite the flexibility to include local factors in determining policy outcomes (Datnow & Park,

2012). Ball (2015) argued that, as different actors represent policy in different settings, policies are contested. A richer understanding of policy is necessary for educators to become strategic actors who control spaces, such as classrooms, even within dominant forms of organization (Duarte & Brewer, 2019). My hope is that this research approach, utilizing teacher voice to understand policy enactment, sheds light on educators and their relationship with policy in a novel way.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how federal and state educational policies undergo transformations and translations through enactment at the local level, specifically the impact of decisions made by teachers in the classroom. Verbal data were collected using semi-structured interviews and were later coded and analyzed through the theoretical approaches of CPA and sensemaking. This research traced the evolution of PBIS, now 25 years past its introduction, from a federal initiative to state policy to local enactment in order to better understand the evolution of educational policies from rhetoric to reality via teacher experiences. I aimed to access teacher voices in this research to better understand how teachers think about enacting policy, including how they advance or impede mandates by resisting dominant forms of organization, when working as political actors in the classroom (Duarte & Brewer, 2019).

Ball et al. (2011) suggested that thinking around policy enactment assumes all actors in the policy process to be equal. I hypothesize that there is great variance in the degree to which administrators and teachers enact federal and state mandates at the district and school levels. Educators participate in policy not only when they follow mandates, but when they resist reform not well suited to their students by sidestepping mandates (Datnow & Park, 2012; Duarte & Brewer, 2019). Ball et al. (2012) posited that teachers, as local actors, possess agency to fast track the evolution of educational mandates, and their very resistance invites a new source of power into the political arena. Ball et al. (2011) acknowledged that junior teachers may largely function as receivers of policy as they are shielded from policy by more senior staff, creating a situation where policy is more about the reality of subject matter and managing the day-to-day in the classroom, and less about big picture, making policy a distant concern. Such junior teachers accept policy as something that is required of the profession, wherein compliance leaves little room for interpretation (Ball et al., 2011). This translation tactic means guidance and documents produced at the local level become crucial for teachers to enact policy, leading to increased

standardization through deprofessionalization (Ball et al., 2011). Ball et al. (2011) suggested that this "regime of accountability" plays into the expectations of new teachers, aligning with many teacher preparation programs (p. 634). Maguire et al. (2010) argued that, as teachers are accountable to mandate multiple policies, which weren't always aligned with one another, they become ambivalent in the policy arena. When policy enactment theory is applied to policy implementation within schools, the form and extent of enactment, the degree to which the policy is mandated, and the fit with local culture, means policies become more complex and more abstract (Maguire et al., 2010). Policy enactment as a negotiated process, separate from linear implementation, responds to the factors at play, including different policy actors (Maguire et al., 2010). Focused on policy enactment, Maguire et al. (2010) noted that the manner in which educators enacted policy varied greatly between individuals, across subject departments, and within groups of individuals. Maguire et al. (2010) continued to state that recognition of the complexity of policy enactment is missing from the classroom setting because, in reality, no matter how regulative a policy may be, teachers' approaches may not always conform to the formal policy.

PBIS is an example of one such policy that was enacted to varying degrees by political actors, including teachers, despite much of its success depending on implementation fidelity. PBIS is an applied behavior theory that focuses on implementation with fidelity to impact student outcomes as part of a whole-school approach (Horner & Sugai, 2015). School-wide behavior expectations in the first tier, or primary level, of support intensity target at least 80% of the school population and include being respectful, responsible, and safe (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Horner and Sugai (2015) stressed that primary level expectations are preventative in nature to reduce the likelihood of problematic behaviors before students make mistakes. PBIS implementation includes defining and teaching school-wide expectations but leaves decisions about specific expectations and methods for teaching those expectations up to the local organization (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Horner and Sugai (2015) stressed that schools implementing PBIS with fidelity are more likely to have engaged, supported individuals with training, resources, and time to work throughout the school to support local cultural variables as part of a successful PBIS approach. Horner and Sugai (2015) stated that, in its first 20 years, over 21,000 schools in the United States engaged with PBIS implementation.

Dunlap et al. (2009) and Kincaid et al. (2016) each examined the history of PBIS, an applied behavior theory under the umbrella of positive behavior support (PBS), with a focus on its origins as an approach to change the behaviors of individuals with severe developmental disabilities. Dunlap et al. (2009) noted that, while initially aimed at individuals with severe disabilities, PBS now extends to other groups, including students with emotional and behavioral disorders, as well as students with severe emotional disturbances. The PBS/PBIS approach emerged in the 1980s, and the label "positive behavior support" began to be used in the 1990s (Kincaid et al., 2016). As research shifted to examine entire schools where PBS approaches were used to improve overall school behavior, the focus on PBS shifted from individuals to school-wide reform and restructuring in the 1990s and early 2000s (Dunlap et al., 2009; Kincaid et al., 2016). Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 introduced the term "positive behavioral interventions and supports" (PBIS) and established the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, a federally funded program to share information about the multi-tiered framework aimed at use in classrooms and entire schools (Kincaid et al., 2016). This increase to school-wide reform followed an increase in beneficiaries of PBS, in which Kincaid et al. (2016) noted it became known as school-wide PBIS or SWPBIS. Kincaid et al. (2016) identified six key features of PBS in their research: positive/respectful, preventative, data-based, evidence-based, educative, and comprehensive. At the initial level, PBS strategies are applied to benefit the entire school population, with those in need of additional support receiving secondary or moderate intensity procedures (Dunlap et al., 2009). Nonresponders are provided with more intense, tertiary tier strategies (Dunlap et al., 2009).

Research Question

This qualitative study was guided by the following research question:

How do teachers make sense of and enact complex education policies, such as PBIS?

Definitions of Key Terms

For each key term, I have provided a definition that will serve as a starting point to understand how I applied them throughout this research study. Definitions are not exhaustive and are not representative of the multiple interpretations possible.

Education Policy – Datnow and Park (2012) defined education policy to establish rules and regulations that encourage compliance and national-scale reform. Adding to that understanding, Gulson et al. (2017), broadly referred to education policy as forms of governance created, influenced, and enforced by a diverse network of policy actors, both inside and outside government. Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) stated that global, national, and local dimensions, along with actors and actants, shape educational policy and practice. Throughout this study, I will apply an understanding of education policy that combines these previous definitions to acknowledge that education policy includes a variety of actors at different levels who influence and enforce rules, and these resulting rules encourage compliance within the system of schooling and government.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) – According to State Support Team 7 (2019), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, better known by its acronym PBIS, is a schoolwide approach to improving school climate and, therefore, achievement through data-driven decision-making. State Support Team 7 (2019) and Sugai and Simonsen (2012) stressed that PBIS is not a prescribed curriculum, but rather interventions and systems that best fit unique local cultures and that should be selected at the school and district level by administrators and teachers.

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) – Brewer (2014) defined CPA as an interdisciplinary form of policy analysis, informed by critical theory, that assumes the social construction of knowledge and power. He added to this definition that policies are open and incomplete, leading to each reader's subjective interpretation. CPA is not intended to find answers, but rather is a way to interpret complex issues in society. Diem et al. (2014) champion policy studies founder Harold Lasswell's understanding of CPA, in which policy issues are examined broadly and in all their complexities.

Teachers as Policy Actors – Policy actors can assume a variety of roles (Ball et al., 2012), but notably Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) considered teachers to be key actors in educational policy as they "interpret, negotiate, and re-vision" the very policies that guide their classrooms (p. 141), even under contradictory pressures. Barlett and Vavrus (2014) added to the understanding of political actors, noting that teachers can exercise creativity as they themselves shape and affect policy, even under the constraints of their own motives and interests and through unexpected "nonhuman actors," such as the tests they create.

Policy Enactment – Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) situated policy enactment, or implementation, through a lens of appropriation, during which they acknowledge actors, including teachers, selectively interpret and implement ideas presented in accordance with their own interests and beliefs. Ball et al. (2012) defined policy enactment as "creating processes of interpretation and recontextualization—that is, the translation of texts into action" (p. 3). To expand on the above definitions of policy enactment, I add the acknowledgement that educational policies are acted upon by diverse policy actors and not simply implemented; policy enactment creates a series of circumstances in which decisions are limited or expanded by the situations presented (Braun et al., 2010).

School Climate – Sugai et al. (2016) defined school climate as a set of shared beliefs and behaviors between, and among, the school community, including students, teachers, and administrators. Sugai et al. (2016) went on to suggest that states that identify school climate as an ESSA indicator should emphasize relationships between behavior, instruction, and success, establish an "umbrella" to organize behavior-related initiatives, invest in local implementation fidelity as a priority, invest in data systems to guide decisions, and consider local context and culture. School climate focuses on the assumptions and beliefs shared within the organization (März & Kelchtermans, 2013).

Neoliberalism – Davies and Gane (2021) defined neoliberalism "the use of state powers to expand and enforce market mechanisms and competition in society" (p. 22). Apple (2006) expanded this conceptualization of neoliberalism and added that, in addition to expanding marketization in society, neoliberalism seeks to minimize public or government services that disrupt access to a free market. Ali (2019) asserted that neoliberal theory accepts that private entities and companies are necessary to sustain public social programs aimed at empowering targeted groups in order to grow the number of productive members in society and, therefore, the economy, while Brown (2015) noted that the reliance on defining governmental programs in economic terms reduces the goal of public education to "produce learners who become earners and consumers" (p. 237).

Post-Neoliberalism or Anti-Neoliberalism – Post-neoliberalism, also referred to as anti-neoliberalism, breaks some aspects of neoliberalism, arising after, and deviating from, the path of neoliberalism, though Springer (2015) advised that we must acknowledge its ambiguity and the difficulty in presenting a concrete definition. Davies and Gane (2021) presented the argument

that post-neoliberalism is not simply situated after neoliberalism but is a set of emergent ideas and reforms that transform key tenets of neoliberal politics. In this line of thinking, post-neoliberal ideas challenge the capacity of the government to supervise and regulate society by returning power to private ownership and governance (Davies & Gane, 2021).

Summary & Dissertation Outline

There does not appear to be enough coursework in undergraduate education programs to fully provide preservice educators with the skills they will need to confidently navigate policy in the classroom. As new and junior teachers transition from training to teaching in the classroom, they are often faced with tackling the world of educational politics on their own, and often this means obediently following whatever building-level leaders present as the latest, greatest goal for students. Teachers who are fortunate enough to take a course in educational policy or law in undergraduate or graduate school might challenge dominant thinking or critically examine the latest top-down mandate, but few have encountered strategies that explicitly teach ways to navigate policies in the classroom when they fail to serve students. Teachers are facing ever-greater pressures around accountability and increased scrutiny about what is happening in the classroom, as education politics continue to play out on the national stage. The next two chapters in this dissertation provide a comprehensive look at the nuances of educational policy and explore concepts and contexts of educational politics as they relate to teachers. Chapter 2 provides an understanding of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), and how teachers become political actors, whether intentional or not. Chapter 3 outlines the methods and methodology that governed how I conducted this qualitative research. It explains the protocol of the interviews that were used to collect data for this study. These two chapters provide the groundwork for findings and analysis, which are presented in Chapter 4, and reflections and suggestions for further study, which are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The main purpose of this study was to understand PBIS policy enactment at the local level, while highlighting the voices of teachers in the political process in a novel way. This chapter introduces and explores key concepts necessary to understand this research, including education policy, PBIS, and CPA. This research is intended to provide readers with an understanding of the complicated relationship between policy and teacher as policies evolve from federally drafted laws to locally implemented classroom practices by addressing the following research question: How do teachers make sense of and enact complex education policies, such as PBIS?

To fully engage in a conversation about PBIS as an education policy, it is necessary to discuss how policy is impacted by decisions at key stages of the process ranging from policy creation to policy adoption and, finally, to policy enactment in the "real world." Education policies are often created by political actors who imagine they will be fully and faithfully implemented and fail to accept the reality that such mandates evolve as they are enacted by additional actors in the political arena, including teachers (Viennet & Pont, 2017). Contextualization of education policy by actors at the local level undoubtedly impacts the policy as it was designed, but what is less clear is how intentional some of the decisions being made by teachers are, as well as the changes that those decisions may bring about.

Education Policy

The contemporary relationship between education policy and the federal government traces back most conspicuously to the ESEA (1965), marking a shift in the allocation of federal dollars to local educational institutions, increasing the role of federal government in public schooling, and redefining who, especially within at-risk populations, qualified as policy beneficiaries (Thomas & Brady, 2005). ESEA increased federal funding but attached school funding to accountability measures that increased schools' responsibilities to produce student achievement and proficiency data (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Prior to ESEA, there was substantially less federal involvement; members of Congress portrayed the ESEA expansion to correct the culture of poverty in the United States (Stein, 2004). Instead of responding to the actual needs of policy beneficiaries, Stein (2004) suggested that these major federal political actors were responding to the theorized needs of their constituents, including the idea that poor

schools needed “corrective intervention” (p. 81). Thomas and Brady (2005) argued similarly that policymakers need a more thorough understanding of the students they are serving, and the context in which policies will be implemented. After its passage, a congressional disagreement followed about whether all children, or just those educationally disadvantaged, should have access to services provided under ESEA (Thomas & Brady, 2005). Members of Congress saw the increased federal role in local schooling to make up for cultural disadvantages of individuals who did not experience middle class culture elsewhere (Stein, 2004). Stein (2004) referred to this “policy culture” (p. 81) as a belief that the noble government was acting as an intervention on behalf of the poor, using federal dollars; as this shift in thinking happened, so too shifted the language surrounding policymaking as entire communities and student bodies were deemed deficient. Stein (2004) argued that such insight into policy construction happened not only in the initial policymaking, but throughout the lifetime of a policy, revealing itself through communication and conversation, publicly documented or not. Mitra (2022) insisted that policy is not all about legislation as it is formally written, but what happens after it passes and the people at the ground level implement it. The impact of local decisions or variability are key to influencing what happens over the lifetime of a policy (Mitra, 2022). While Tomas and Brady (2005) agree that policymakers need contextual insight into policy construction, it is up to educational researchers to “develop more effective policy interventions” (p. 52). Practitioners, families, and students all interact with policy-generated routines, both conforming and resisting the language and enactment of policy (Stein, 2004). Stein (2004) confirmed that educators enact policy in ways that both comply and defy the intentions, supporting Brewer’s (2014) concept of CPA, where policies are open and incomplete.

A single education policy looks different based on local policy decisions. Local decisions shape implementation approaches: decisions around how funds are allocated at the local level shape programmatic decisions; sensemaking of local political actors, including teachers, shapes policy depending on whether or not it confirms prior beliefs or challenges current thinking (Stein, 2004). Thomas and Brady (2005) added to Stein’s theory, suggesting that allowing states to determine student proficiency levels under NCLB (the 2002 reauthorization of ESEA) only added to disparities and problems connected to the federal influence on education. NCLB increased the role of states in education policy, relying on states to administer assessments and enforce mandates for schools (Mitra, 2022). As schools played an increasing role in

implementing learning management systems, gathering data, and influencing instructional change, Mitra (2022) argued that school districts are increasingly serving as policy initiators. Policy implementation is sometimes used interchangeably with policy compliance, where local actors' practices are expected to conform to policy regulations (Stein, 2004). This is a complex approach to policy enactment—teachers may believe they are acting in compliance with a policy without sharing the same policy understanding as administrators, district personnel, or the state and federal legislators who have designed the policy (Stein, 2004). In some instances, Stein (2004) noted an additional approach to policy compliance altogether, where there is an overall disregard for the policy in general, which also impacts implementation. State and federal legislators base education policy on assumptions about what schools need and what schools lack, filtered through their own lived experiences (Stein, 2004). Teachers, as local political actors, further alter policy mandates as they apply their own sensemaking, even as a collective understanding of policy language and routine is taken for granted within the school setting (Stein, 2004).

To understand the impact national curriculum, assessment, and leaders have on policy formation and implementation (or appropriation) across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, researchers must consider the networks of people and ideas that arise and shift, even on a temporary basis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014). In his overview of educational policy history, Apple (2019) traced the need to fight control of education by dominant classes back to the 1930s and the work of George Counts. Apple, through Counts, pointed to this time in history as one where governmental dominance and education outcomes were already controlled by dominant classes, instead of a democratic society. In their response to "A Nation at Risk," Carson et al. (1993) stressed the importance of rethinking performance data in education, noting that collected data were often used in unintended applications, resulting in "poorly focused actions, with disappointing outcomes'' (p. 309). The debate over program oversight gained momentum in the 1970s, when both congressional lawmakers and the taxpaying public demanded measurable results in public spending, education included (Stein, 2004). At the same time, neoliberalism took hold in the 1970s, with a focus on individualism, marketization, and competition, and now these same measurable outcomes are a key part of Ohio's vision for PBIS implementation in schools (Duarte, 2021). Carpenter and Brewer (2014) argued that, at the same time neoliberalism

took hold, centralized educational policies focused on credibility, and accountability became more important than policies aimed at equity in education.

Bartlett and Vavrus (2014) looked at policy in two ways: vertical, which examines policy across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels; and horizontal, which examines policy as it plays out in distinct locations through assemblages of power. Policy is deeply shaped by actors in different locations who exert influence in unequal amounts, depending on local culture and context (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014). If educational leaders can create culture across a district, it builds trust and validity for instructional mandates (Mitra, 2022). Cochran-Smith et al. (2013) noted that, while policymaking is a complicated, iterative process, many U.S. educational policies focus on reform by way of increased accountability. This complicated, messy process is largely attributable to the policy actors involved, who are charged with both identifying the problem and possible solutions, contributing to what Cochran-Smith et al. (2013) referred to as the "policy web" of education. Cochran-Smith et al. (2013) posited that this "policy web" is further complicated by multiple levels of actors at the local, state, and federal levels, including groups, individuals, think tanks, and other influencers who construct the web. In contrast to the "policy web" is the "policy cycle," which Cochran-Smith et al. (2013) defined as the ways in which teachers interact with policy and its consequences. Duarte (2021) took a more concrete and narrowed approach to tracing neoliberal policies and did so through a number of federal policies including ESEA passed in 1965, 2001's NCLB, and ESSA, which reauthorized ESEA in 2015 and perpetuated federal mandates around testing.

A key controversy in policymaking is what goals drive policies at the state and federal level, as social institutions are inevitable sites of political disagreement (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013). Contemporary governmental policies driven by what Cochran-Smith et al. (2013) term the "neoliberal agenda" focus on the economy, the individual, and free market choices. When applied to education policy specifically, the shift to a neoliberal perspective in the U.S. has placed an increased emphasis on outcomes in education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013). In their research, Duarte (2021) drew attention to neoliberal reform policies that are aimed at increasing accountability through prescriptive practices that manifest as measurable outcomes, such as student performance data. This same neoliberal focus has changed the face of accountability in education policy and brought about issues of professionalization and local control, while ignoring teacher control as part of the debate (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013). Ellison et al. (2018)

defined the neoliberal paradigm as the emerging set of policies aimed at standards, testing, privatization, and accountability. Such neoliberal policies are created by elite policymakers who have little understanding of the day-to-day experiences of schooling. This focus on outcomes means an increased focus on data about students, with local education agencies seeking opportunities to make better decisions about programs, in line with much of the thought process that has been behind the expansion of PBIS (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013).

Neoliberal capitalism is behind many processes and practices that form the values and regimes that make up school cultures (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Notions of neoliberalism are embedded in the governance by data that PBIS depends on for its success, contributing to regulation and intervention in public schooling (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Power and, therefore, resources are often allocated based on data, while outcomes are the responsibility of teachers (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) suggested that accountability measures and the legitimization of data encourages public schools to invest resources in as many forms of measurement as possible, including tests, test results, and test validity, or, in the case of PBIS, student behavior data. Schools continually collect data when implementing PBIS in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program and to make changes to better the program (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). The emphasis on using data to monitor behavior of the collective school suggests a need to control the entire school population, encouraging complicity and accountability in the image of a neoliberal subject into a compliant worker (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) contested that, while schools have autonomy to determine expectations aligned with local culture under PBIS, the resulting expectations are almost always uniform across all schools, guiding individuals towards a collective governance, with the outcome being appropriate behaviors among citizens. PBIS often ignores local context, despite room for it in program design, and instead approaches model discipline as one-size-fits-all to encourage positive social behaviors expected under neoliberal control (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) argued that neoliberal control of social behaviors leads to the normalization of school-wide expectations, where individuals are expected to comply in a range of settings throughout the school.

PBIS as an education policy encourages neoliberal marketization of the individual as it celebrates and publicly acknowledges “good” behavior, commodifying rewards for expected social norms and contributing to what Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) consider a sense of

consumerism in the program. It is common for schools utilizing PBIS to reward expected or desired behaviors with tokens for prizes, tickets for drawings, or tangible items, which creates a consumerist space in exchange for normalized, school-wide behaviors (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) suggested that this reward system turns student behavior into a product, rather than an intrinsically motivated drive to participate as a citizen of the school.

PBIS encourages teachers, knowingly or not, to become participants and enforcers of neoliberal education policy through surveillance, contact, and marketization. Teachers are encouraged to monitor student behavior in a variety of locations while making positive contact and rewarding desired behaviors (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). This approach to governing student behavior is what Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) refer to as a state reorganization aimed at meeting the needs and ideals of a greater market ideology. In the section about PBIS in this chapter, I provide additional details about the connection between PBIS and neoliberalism.

Education policy is complex, partly because the motivation and strategies that shape it happen out of the public view (Leithwood et al., 2004). Generally, the initiators of education policy are politicians, and the issues, solutions, and participants involved in agenda setting are not always predictable (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leithwood et al. (2004) returned to the idea of culture when deconstructing education policy and argued that such reform is frequently unsuccessful because it is mandated without context for local school culture; such is the case in many instances of PBIS implementation. This creates a divide between educational reform as political elites design it and how practitioners, such as teachers, act on it at the micro level (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Political Actors in Education

Ellison et al. (2018) conceptualized teachers as powerless agents and targets of reform, situated at the bottom of the political hierarchy. In their analysis, they suggested that policy actors include everyone from government entities to private businesses, to think tanks, that control not only the content but the pace of change in educational policy. Apple (2019) expanded on this argument, as he considered transformations in education to be the result of actions in society, not just educators as policy actors. Ellison et al. (2018) divided policy actors into two groups: those with relative advantage are considered the elite and the rest, the non-elite. The elite include the government, policy institutes, and businesses; the non-elite include families, students,

and teachers. The non-elite are positioned as policy problems meant to be managed by the elite (Ellison et al., 2018). Policy actors who occupy elite positions set, define, and construct policies that are performed and negotiated by the non-elite in the classroom (Ellison et al., 2018). Duarte (2021) challenged these ideas about teachers as powerless, non-elite actors and argued that teachers can choose to negotiate or reconfigure policies, even those that building leaders, such as principals, choose to implement, in spite of a given policy's obstruction of equity or local values. In line with Duarte, Carpenter and Brewer (2014) focused on the positionality of educational leaders who are expected to interact with prescriptive policies that drive accountability and contribute to social reproduction practices. In their overview of democratic practices, Carpenter and Brewer pointed out that these policies limit the abilities of schools to fight for the unique needs of each school community. Brown (2015) found that teachers used their powers as political actors to pursue ways to make students feel comfortable in the classroom, rather than problematizing the neoliberal systems and policies directing classroom practices.

Ellison et al. (2018) argued that teachers are deprofessionalized as they are forced to operate under systems of accountability. In their study, Ellison et al. (2018) used this gap in the research to address teachers' missing voices in the policy debate. They claimed that teachers were tasked with additional demands, without the necessary resources or training to meet students' needs, ultimately reducing teachers' roles as policy actors (Ellison et al., 2018). These demands often pointed towards accountability measures, which created barriers to effective teaching and learning. Ellison et al. (2018) concluded that expansion of the sphere of policy creation, such that it begins with, and includes, communities, is necessary to reposition control away from detached centralized hubs and towards local control, an act that would recenter teachers' voices. Duarte (2021) agreed with the positionality of teachers as deprofessionalized objects, but pointed out that, under systems of power, teachers bring lived experiences that undoubtedly change policy as they employ their own creativity. In his research on early childhood educators, Brown (2015) recognized that challenging the status quo of neoliberal policies was both difficult and dangerous for public teachers, as this institutional resistance could impact how administrators viewed teacher effectiveness. Teachers, as political actors, risk their jobs when their actions attempt to counter neoliberal policies (Brown, 2015).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

One such policy that has challenged teachers as political actors is the spread of PBIS. According to PBISApps (n.d.), PBIS emerged from a research unit at the University of Oregon known as the Educational and Community Supports (ECS), part of the College of Education. The first director of ECS was Dr. Robert Horner, who used his research to create the PBIS framework (PBISApps, n.d.). The goal of Dr. Horner's work was to monitor progress, identify trends, and find solutions using data to examine behaviors in real-time, and not weeks or months after the behaviors occurred (PBISApps, n.d.). Dr. Horner hypothesized that by identifying when, where, why, and how behaviors were happening quicker, schools would be able to provide faster, more targeted interventions to address problem behaviors (PBISApps, n.d.). Dr. George Sugai served with Dr. Horner as co-director of the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports at the University of Connecticut and the University of Oregon (Moses, n.d.). Dr. Sugai's research with Dr. Horner addressed the need to find efficient and effective use of discipline data in decision making (Moses, n.d.). Sugai and Horner (2009) explained the purpose of schoolwide positive behavior supports to "establish and maintain an effective, efficient, and relevant social culture in which teaching and learning are maximized" (p. 307).

The first American public schools were tasked with maximizing academic achievement while preparing students for life as skilled, knowledgeable citizens, but as the purpose of schooling evolved and became more complex, greater attention was placed on the school's role in values and character development (Sugai & Horner, 2009). This increased attention to behavior and social development is evident in education legislation including IDEA and NCLB (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Sugai and Horner (2009) designed PBIS as a systems approach intended to establish positive school culture and behavioral supports with the goal of creating safe and effective learning environments for all students. PBIS, as Sugai and Horner (2009) viewed it, targeted measurable outcomes, championed data to guide decision making, and required evidenced-based interventions. Sugai and Horner (2009) stressed that PBIS was not a prescriptive intervention, but—like many accountability policies in education—relied on formally and accurately implemented structures in order to be successful. Nationally designed programs that require fidelity for successful implementation fail to acknowledge the impact of local decision making on the ground. Like other education reforms focused on accountability,

Sugai and Horner (2009) emphasized the necessity of record-keeping and data collection for PBIS to be effective and efficient.

Aside from the intentions Sugai and Horner established as founders of PBIS, Bornstein (2015) wrote that the legal intent of PBIS was to create more inclusive structures within schools. From a school climate perspective, promoting orderly behavior is what sets "the criterion for belonging" (p. 249), where there is a desire to compare all students against normative standards to create what Borstein (2015) defined as "institutional obsession with normalcy" (p. 249). Bornstein (2015) equated the use of PBIS with state mandated regulation of student behavior, through which state-level policymakers exercise authority by regulating the lives and bodies of students through prescribed power.

As a legal mandate, PBIS was introduced in the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). To understand the rise of PBIS as a policy, it is necessary to briefly look at the evolution of behavioral interventions in education, beginning with the age of accountability. In the 1980s, behavioral interventions were aimed specifically at students with behavior disorders, and in the 1990s, the reauthorization of IDEA first legislated the national Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). ESSA, a reauthorization of ESEA, was signed into law on December 10, 2015, and placed an emphasis on school climate **(**Sugai et al., 2016). As federal law, ESEA, and the reauthorized ESSA, provided federal funds to public schools in the U.S., while giving states control to set their own goals and outcomes. Under the ESSA reauthorization, states were allowed to choose school climate as one of the indicators of "School Quality or Student Success," which can be supported by tiered systems of support for all students, under the umbrella of PBIS. School climate can be measured using social validation, archival data, and observation **(**Sugai et al., 2016). Under the PBIS approach, tier I supports are aimed at all students, tier II supports are focused on at-risk students, and tier III supports are focused on students who need more personalized and intensive assistance (State Support Team 7, 2019).

PBIS is an approach instead of a prescribed curriculum, intervention, or practice (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). Sugai and Simonsen (2012) stressed that PBIS is reliant on the use of data as a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), for both academics and behavior. And, in line with many of the accountability measures associated with neoliberal policy, the school climate indicator under ESSA still required data comparison of student subgroups **(**Sugai et al., 2016).

Molloy et al. (2013) suggested that real-world settings are critical when examining the success of programs such as PBIS, therefore, future policy efforts must take into account changes that are likely to happen in the implementation process, in order to create more successful policies from the beginning. PBIS is a response to policymakers' call for accountability and improving academic achievement across student populations, with positive school culture and reduced disciplinary actions serving as the impetus of the reform (Brown et al., 2023). Brown et al. (2023) reasoned that SWPBIS supports neoliberal marketization systems by engaging in a reward system for expected behaviors, incorporating a capitalist-based conception of schooling for students, where those who perform in expected ways are incentivized for their adherence to neoliberal worldviews.

At the state level, Ohio's strategic plan (*Each Child, Our Future*) formally recognized the need for positive school climate (State Support Team 7, 2019). Ohio House Bill 318 (HB 318), the Supporting Alternatives for Fair Education (SAFE) Act (2018), addressed this need for a positive school climate through multi-tiered behavior supports, which many Ohio educators associate with PBIS (State Support Team 7, 2019). In their 2019 update, State Support Team 7 reported that Ohio schools who had implemented PBIS with fidelity demonstrated reductions in office referrals and other disciplinary action, including suspensions. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) supported the decision for statewide implementation of PBIS under HB 318, which not only required schools to implement PBIS school-wide, but also mandated that Ohio districts provide professional development in PBIS within three years, by November 2021 (State Support Team 7, 2019). When then Ohio Governor Kasich signed HB 318 into law in August 2018, it specified local requirements for the implementation of PBIS, which reinforced ideas that PBIS is not a prescribed curriculum, but rather a collection of interventions and systems that best fit unique local culture, which should be selected at the school and district level by administrators and teachers (State Support Team 7, 2019).

State Support Team 7 (2019) stressed that the PBIS framework encouraged local education associations to develop policies and schoolwide approaches to "define, teach and support appropriate behavior" (para. 2) as part of their efforts to improve school climate and, therefore, achievement through data-driven decision-making. In their review of Ohio's PBIS recognition system, Noltemeyer et al. (2018) outlined PBIS as a proactive framework to reinforce expected behaviors, while using data to inform decisions about supports. While HB

318 did not explicitly state as such, the attention to student data suggests an alignment with neoliberal policies driven by accountability practices, as the Bill also requires schools to report to the ODE with information about annual levels of PBIS implementation (State Support Team 7, 2019).

While HB 318 paved the way to require schoolwide PBIS adoption and training of teachers in multi-tiered supports in Ohio, it did little in the way of providing funding to support schools. Noltemeyer et al. (2018) accordingly called into question Ohio's ability to scale up implementation of PBIS, beginning with early successes under the Ohio Integrated Systems Model and eventually landing on Ohio's 2013 adoption of policies requiring schools implement some form of positive behavioral supports—without any dedicated state funding. In the 2019–2020 school year, $2 million worth of competitive grants were made available, which were limited to $5,000 per school and $50,000 per applicant (State Support Team 7, 2019).

While the intentions of PBIS seem to support efforts by educators to grow all students, absent from the political routine of this education framework are the culture of students, teachers, and the community (Brown, 2015). Education policy, the expanding field of political actors, and mandates such as PBIS, directly impact the day-to-day lives of teachers and students in the classroom. Brown et al. (2023) suggested that PBIS appears to promote neoliberal structures of schooling, where individuality is sacrificed for uniform conduct expectations in order to promote student behaviors through daily governance in the classroom, while abandoning authentic relationships in favor of performativity. Brown et al. (2023) argued that one way to disrupt the neoliberal power embedded in programs like PBIS is to move beyond student outcomes and to consider the type of school community educators hope to create as an act of change.

Sugai and Horner (2009) focused on using PBIS to build culture at the school level in a way that takes into account the local context. A key component of school-level implementation includes the leadership team, which is made up of an administrator, general and special educators including special areas like art, music, and physical education, instructional support staff, non-certified staff, families, and students; this team should meet at least monthly to help guide the local implementation of PBIS (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Sugai and Horner (2009) envisioned the local leadership team and staff developing an action plan that a majority of the staff agree to make a "good faith effort" (p. 322) to support and implement. The leadership team is tasked with reevaluating data sources and plan concerns until a majority of staff agree on its acceptability

(Sugai & Horner, 2009). Leadership teams must carry out continuous evaluation once the program has been implemented at the local level, including assessing if the action plan is being implemented, evaluating the degree to which it is being implemented accurately, ensuring that the majority of staff are participating in implementation, and judging student response to interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Mitra (2022) put forward the idea that policy created between federal, state, and local governments is multidirectional—states and school districts alter federal policies through local enactment. Through this study, I aimed to use interviews centered around teacher voice to better understand how teachers, as local political actors, enact PBIS-aligned practices, in the face of increased accountability measures and outside pressures from political stakeholders. To understand the data generated from the interviews, I applied CPA and sensemaking as my theoretical frameworks. As outlined in the next section, CPA was used as a methodological support in my analysis of how teachers' decisions contribute to the political arena; sensemaking was used to examine how teachers construct their own realities with a school-wide policy like PBIS. CPA and sensemaking combined produced a critical analysis of how teachers enact top-down policy in their classrooms, in response to mandates from building and district level administrators, state legislators, and federal policies.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Policy Analysis

In their investigation into influential critical policy analysis, Diem et al. (2014) utilized a definition for CPA that questioned "the complexity, subjectivity, and equity of policy" (para. 50) while also examining unintended consequences of policy, which was crucial when applying CPA to the themes that arose from interviews with teachers about the enactment of PBIS. Diem et al. (2014) considered CPA to be a response to the current condition of education, where traditional approaches to policy analysis view change or reform as deliberate, whereas critical approaches to policy analysis acknowledge a divide between rhetoric and reality. CPA as a critical methodological and theoretical framework explores how individuals react to institutional forces—in the case of this study, CPA can be applied to delve into teacher reactions to top-down policies like PBIS.

In his analysis, Apple (2019) insisted that the effects of education policies need to be challenged by making public the struggle over authority and identity in schooling, in part

through CPA. Apple (2019) went on to argue that CPA is necessary to understand the complicated connections between education and systems of power in society; he considered three elements necessary to understand any policy: production, distribution, and reception. The application of CPA as a theoretical framework guides the understanding of teachers as political actors through the cycle of production, distribution, and reception of PBIS as a mandated policy. Brewer (2014) argued that policymaking is a social situation and, therefore, involves people in three capacities: agents, actors, and subjects. Individuals perform their role for a given place and time; in the case of this study, teachers perform their role in their classroom as part of the building-wide rollout of PBIS. In applying CPA to the lived experiences of teachers, Brewer (2014) stressed that teacher identities, as part of a school faculty, are produced by social interactions, which considers social and political environments at that moment in time, as teachers grapple with policy understanding and enactment.

Researchers utilizing CPA in a traditional sense typically begin by examining the politics and compromises that create a policy; next researchers consider how any particular policy is distributed and how that distribution results in power, such as state laws; finally, researchers examine how a policy is "read" through reception, reinterpretation, and resistance by local actors (Apple, 2019). Apple himself saw the need to apply CPA as a way to deconstruct the histories and contexts from which education policies have arisen, tracing hidden effects and longer-term consequences; he suggested further work around teacher engagement, which may disrupt policies that work to diminish teacher autonomy. In their overview of traditional approaches to educational policy studies, Diem et al. (2014) called into question the belief that empirical research accesses all the necessary information to understand and implement educational policies and practices. Brewer (2014) claimed that critical policy analysts must examine not just the policy, but the ways in which events complicate and resist knowledge (re)production. This includes finding ways to insert more voices in the policy process to "find a new picture" (Brewer, 2014, p. 282).

In his critique of critical analysis, Apple (2019) argued that theories such as CPA cannot be solely about understanding educational policies but must also document efforts to challenge dominant forms of policy in history. Apple (2019) stressed that a critical stance plays a role not just in the deconstruction of neoliberalism in policy, but also the *construction* of policies and practices that align with democratic values. In his review of cultural history and CPA, Brewer

(2014) stated that policy and political situations must be deconstructed to understand both how we arrive at the problem and how we arrive at the solution. The unquestioned reproduction of PBIS-based policies can become a social regularity of the school. Brewer (2014) went on to argue that CPA can help reveal marginalizations and negotiations in the greater social world by examining ways in which people (teachers) resist or repurpose such dominant social regularities.

Diem et al. (2014) drew attention to critical approaches used by influential educational policy study scholars, including policy rhetoric versus practiced reality or, similarly, policy development versus implementation. They also focused on scholars who use critical approaches in educational policy to understand how key political issues arise, what policies are aimed at solving, their evolution over time, and their reinforcement of dominant culture (Diem et al., 2014). I agree that this focus on history and context is crucial to understanding how a policy like PBIS becomes the dominant culture of a school. Diem et al. (2014) pointed out that education policy has evolved into an issue of national importance, where control has been tightened by federal educational policies in order to enact greater control on schooling processes.

Theoretical Framework: Sensemaking

In addition to CPA as a methodological and theoretical framework for understanding teachers as political actors, sensemaking is an analytical and theoretical framework that was used in this study to explore how teachers digest, process, and enact top-down education policies through personal meaning making. Sensemaking is integral to the policy enactment process of teachers because it considers how they take pre-existing knowledge, alter it in some way, and build on that knowledge (Mitra, 2022). Spillane and Anderson (2014) examined how meanings are created in a specific place when participants are faced with making sense of change, particularly where uncertainty is involved. Sensemaking moves beyond interpreting a policy generically and interprets the policy in a specific environment; in the case of this study, I examined how teachers made meaning not just of PBIS, but how they made meaning of PBIS in their classrooms, based on their own socialization and experience (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Spillane et al. (2002) noted that teacher sensemaking is nuanced because teachers often encounter accountability mechanisms, including education policy directives, through evolving understandings that are mediated by the school community. Approaching policy analysis from a sensemaking framework suggests that policy enactment is as much about what teachers don't do,

as it is about what they DO do, as they grapple with how political mandates apply to their school and choose to "ignore, adapt, or adopt policy locally" (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 733). Sensemaking happens through ongoing situations where policy is enacted, or interpreted and acted on, based on the enablement and constraints of the setting and collective meaning making (Spillane et al., 2002). Teacher sensemaking is dependent, at least in part, on administrators who control funding, materials, and classroom requirements; teachers must then make decisions about what policies mean and how to adopt, adapt, or ignore such policies based on their own perception of local context (Spillane et al., 2002). Teacher sensemaking can also be impacted by building-level leadership through the packaging or branding of education policies. When teachers are presented with sanitized charts, limited or pre-selected professional development materials, or marketing information about accountability measures, the teacher's attempt at sensemaking is standardized and sterilized through the administrator's understanding of external demands and internal pressures (Spillane et al., 2002).

Extending the theoretical framework of sensemaking, März and Kelchtermans (2013) examined education reform and found that such spaces are not neutral and rely on values, which challenge educators to consider what is better or best, who possesses the power to make judgment calls, and what criteria is applied to determine benchmarks, requiring educators to construct multiple meanings out of a single policy. März and Kelchtermans (2013) argued that enactment is not unilateral and that when sensemaking is applied to understanding reforms or policies, teachers construct meaning in their environments, which in turn further shapes their actions. Teachers engage in collective sensemaking based on shared assumptions, norms, and values, which combined produce school culture (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). The structure of a school, including formal positions of power and influence, continue to impact sensemaking, forming what März and Kelchtermans (2013) referred to as micropolitics. Micropolitics can challenge teachers through contradictions of what is right and what is good for their students, forcing teachers to reconsider deeply held beliefs, shifting their sensemaking perspective, and perhaps eliciting enactment behavior that is resistant or proactive (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). Sensemaking is a complex process where roles, positions, and processes influence the perceptions and actions of teachers, beyond the stipulations of mandated policies (März & Kelchtermans, 2013).

Sensemaking can provide a framework through which to understand the complex relationship teachers build with education policy. Aside from beliefs and perspectives that influence sensemaking, teachers can be influenced by practical knowledge, which can aid or interfere with how teachers interpret policy (Allen & Penuel, 2015). The structure of a school can further influence policy implementation. Strategies such as time for collaboration and reflection, purposeful policy introduction to teachers, and engagement of teachers in the decision-making process influence how teachers construct meaning in their sensemaking of policy (Mitra, 2022). Allen and Penuel (2015) argued that analyzing how teachers, as local political actors, negotiate meaning is a productive way to understand a lack of coherence at the micro-level. Ambiguity and uncertainty, including contradictions between demands and resources, impact potential changes when new education policies are introduced to teachers (Allen & Penuel, 2015). Allen and Penuel (2015) hypothesized that teachers in the U.S. are inundated with numerous changes related to teaching and learning, which demand sensemaking in order to grapple with the pressures of major reforms.

Sensemaking helps researchers understand how teachers and administrators make sense of education policy when they must digest an externally created policy that impacts students (Leithwood et al., 2004). The sensemaking process is necessary to understand how policy enactment evolves at the local level, because it takes into account values, previous experience, culture, and organizational structure when exploring how teachers act on policy (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leithwood et al. (2004) observed that sensemaking allows educators to create meaning of new situations, which may not fit with previous expectations, by using past experiences to help clarify contradictory mandates. When sensemaking among teachers results in resistance to change or lack of compliant behavior, it may not be a deliberate attempt to maintain the status quo or undermine a new policy, but rather may be a complex reaction to the demands on capacity and power that a new mandate requires (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Summary

The main purpose of this study was to explore transformations and translations of federal and state policies as shaped by teacher decisions in the classroom. There are several key pieces of information necessary to understand this qualitative study. Educational policy, political actors, PBIS, CPA, and sensemaking all work together to explore the complex political situations

teachers face in classrooms in 2023. These key ideas were used to undertake and support data collection, data analysis, and to understand the impact of teacher decisions on a single policy at the local level. Chapter 3 outlines the methods and methodologies I used in this qualitative research study. It details the interview process that was used to collect data for this study. Chapter 3 covers the advantages and limitations of the method, sample interview questions, and possible implications for this study.

Chapter 3: Methods & Methodology

The purpose of my qualitative research study was to, through semi-structured interviews designed to highlight teacher voice, explore how federal and state policies are interpreted and enacted by teachers in the classroom, impacting change. This chapter examines how I used interviews to deconstruct my research topic. Semi-structured interviews provided a rich context and opportunity for individual teacher voices in order to better understand policy construction and enactment on a local level. Interview questions were designed to gain a better understanding of how teachers view PBIS as an education policy and how teachers, as political actors, made sense of building-wide policies related to PBIS in the construction and enactment stages. Interviews with five teachers and one administrator were used to uncover distinct contexts for individual teacher experiences. Later in this chapter, I include specific details about how I used interviews as a method, and how that was applied to education policy research.

Participants and Setting

The setting for this research study was a large suburban high school in the Midwest that has been a local- and state-level leader in PBIS policy construction. The administrative team was the same for the prior eight years at the research site, including the duration of the PBIS rollout. All teachers within the school are expected to participate in PBIS enactment, though a selection of staff, teachers, and administrators serve on the PBIS leadership team, with differing levels of commitment and responsibility related to local policy construction. The school, and the district, use PBIS as part of the outwardly communicated behavioral expectations for students. Expectations are regularly communicated in the student handbook, on social media, via posters in the hallways, in classrooms, and in common areas, and through community partnerships such as the local recreation center. Students are expected to be safe, respectful, responsible, and kind, both in school and out in the community. For school year 2021–2022, the most recent year for which data was available from the Ohio Department of Education Report Portal (2023), there were 2372 students enrolled at the research site, with the majority of the student population identified as White (80%), Multiracial (7.2%), or Black (5.8%). Over 25.2% of the student population was identified as economically disadvantaged, and 14.1% students were identified as having disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2023). The most recently available graduation cohort (2021) had a four-year longitudinal graduation rate of 95.6% (Ohio

Department of Education, 2023). For school year 2021–2022, the most recent year for which data is available from the Ohio Department of Education Report Portal (2023), the demographic makeup of the teacher population at the research site was 162 teachers, 94 of whom were female and 68 of whom were male. Many teachers identified as White (154 teachers), four identified as Not Specified, two identified as Black, and two identified as Asian (Ohio Department of Education, 2023). The level of education for staff was above the state average, with 82.7% holding at least a master's degree (Ohio Department of Education, 2023).

PBIS was introduced broadly to the high school staff at the research site in the fall of 2016, with the intent to fully roll it out over the course of a few years (School Principal, personal communication, August 12, 2016). A committee was formed to help assist with the initial rollout at the high school; the committee continued to meet throughout the first school year after PBIS was introduced. By the fall of 2018, teachers were expected to work in content-area groups to produce classroom matrices with PBIS-aligned focuses aimed at communicating classroom-level PBIS goals and expectations to students (School Principal, personal communication, August 13, 2018). The classroom matrix remains the primary way teachers control and implement PBIS expectations in individual classrooms (see Appendix G). These matrices are submitted to administrators annually before professional goal and evaluation meetings in order to hold teachers accountable for their role in PBIS implementation at the building level. Throughout the interviews, many teachers cited the classroom matrix as their primary mode of compliance with PBIS demands. Teachers are key political implementers, exercising choice in what they perceive to be the right fit for their classrooms and regularly choosing how, and to what extent, they implement and utilize school wide PBIS practices and data, and that is largely done through decisions they make in their classroom matrices. Qualitative research, interviews included, is necessary to share the story of PBIS as an evolved policy and highlight the decisions teachers make.

Philosophical Worldview

A constructivist worldview made the most sense for this research, because the subjective meanings of some individuals were critical to understanding the varied meanings and interpretations of PBIS in the classroom (Bhattacharya, 2017). At each level of the policy design and construction process are political actors who operate through historical and cultural norms

that shape how they engage with and make sense of their world (Bhattacharya, 2017). A constructivist approach was key to my positionality awareness and respecting my colleagues and the cultural goals of the district. I have intimate access to staff and information related to PBIS policy construction in our building, and as a teacher-researcher, I had to negotiate multiple meanings with the data collected, while honoring the meanings and interpretations of others (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Semi-Structured Interviews

As a researcher, I am interested in ways teachers act as translators of policy, as opposed to how teachers behave when fulfilling the role of obedient policy implementer. One way to address this was to gather input about policy enactment using teacher voices. Hatch (2002) noted that interviews are often combined with other approaches but can be a primary qualitative research collection strategy. In this study, I applied semi–structured interviews to gather data and insight from teacher participants and previous administration at the research site. Interviews were used as a data collection tool to explore "events, meanings, and experiences" (Xu & Zammit, 2020, p. 4). The interview protocol focused on key components identified by Creswell and Creswell (2018), including an introduction to familiarize participants with the purpose of the interview and research study, gathering basic information by asking questions aimed at initial feelings and perceptions of PBIS before moving on to more complex content questions, and a closing to remind participants of their privacy, ability to remove themselves from the study, and access to results of the research.

Hatch (2002) advised researchers to generate questions ahead of time but to use participants' responses to guide the interview. I generated a list of 13 core questions, tailored the questions to the responses and interests of each participant, and employed the flexibility to reduce or eliminate questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Xu & Zammit, 2020). These predetermined questions were meant as a jumping off point for participants to discuss PBIS, but I left space for the conversation to naturally evolve beyond the prepared questions and opportunities for participants to expand on their answers and lead the interview into new directions (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Prepared questions are what Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined as content questions. The purpose of these questions was to focus on feelings, understandings, and experiences with PBIS enactment and were meant to dissect the

phenomenon being studied into its different facets (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). At the conclusion of the interview, closing instructions gave the participant a chance to share any parting information, while giving information for follow up, results, and a chance to remind the participant of their agency as a political actor (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I interviewed five teachers who volunteered to participate and one administrator who was invited to participate. I recruited teachers at the research site with PBIS enactment experience and at least one year of teaching experience at the high school level to participate in interviews focused on teacher knowledge and experience with PBIS. Though I began each interview with specific questions, the dynamics and interactions during the interviews were a guiding force to determine the direction of the conversation around PBIS as an education policy, putting teacher participants at the forefront of the research (Hatch, 2002).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	Gender	Role	Years of Experience
Thomas (TA)	male	Administrator	20
Jennifer (JD)	female	Teacher	17
Avery (AV)	female	Teacher	1
Ruth (RT)	female	Teacher	29
Glen (GS)	male	Teacher	13
Sam (SS)	male	Teacher	11

Interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and notes were taken during the interviews to respond to the interests and themes that organically presented themselves during the process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The protection of participants and ethical concerns were at the forefront of the research. The responses participants provided were done so confidentially for research purposes, and all participants were assigned pseudonyms to encourage trust, protect identities, and provide an opportunity to speak freely. Zoom recordings were used to create transcripts, which were provided to participants for accuracy review and clarification. The goal of the interviews was to foster a safe space and rich, deep conversations with teachers to explore the role they occupy as policy actors and not to arrive at a right or wrong answer about

teachers and policy. I applied a constructivist approach to the transcript analysis, looking for evidence that teachers had an opportunity to construct their own knowledge about PBIS, instead of passively receiving PBIS as a top-down policy. I coded each interview using Dedoose through a deductive coding process where I analyzed the transcripts to look for themes and patterns consistent with a predetermined set of codes. Finding meaning through patterns and themes was crucial to understand the phenomenon being studied and is a critical link between collecting and interpreting data (Xu & Zammit, 2020). After the initial deductive coding, I revised the identified themes to ensure I had captured the essence of participants' experiences as Xu and Zammit (2020) suggested. Though I used codes to analyze the data, I considered what Xu and Zammit (2020) refer to as the panorama approach, considering participants as a whole to appreciate teacher sensemaking without overly simplifying their responses. Interview notes supplemented each interview to help make "rich and accurate" transcriptions (Hatch, 2002, p. 139).

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Introduce yourself, your years of experience, and your content area.
2. How did you feel about PBIS when you were first introduced to it?
3. How did you go about wrapping your head around PBIS at our school?
4. How did you prepare to implement PBIS?
5. What is PBIS to you?
6. What is it NOT?
7. How do you feel about PBIS?
8. Describe what PBIS looks like in your classroom.
9. What is your understanding of PBIS as an education policy?
10. How do you share your PBIS-related expectations with students? Families?
11. What does PBIS look like when implemented with fidelity?
12. Will you briefly summarize your perspective about implementing PBIS at the high school level?
13. What would you change about PBIS implementation?

Administrator Perspective

In addition to teacher interviews, a past school administrator at the research site was also interviewed to gain an understanding of his experience shaping and implementing PBIS. School

administrators play a key role in sensemaking because they often control the conditions under which policy is introduced and implemented (Leithwood et al., 2004). Because Leithwood et al. (2004) suggested that sensemaking is impacted not only by the nature of the policy, but also the groups present in the school, it felt necessary to triangulate data collected from teachers with context provided by administration. Leithwood et al. (2004) suggested that because administrators have a larger institutional perspective of policy, they respond differently to mandates, which can alter the conditions under which the mandate is carried out. The use of an administrator interview interpreted how policy was presented, in contrast to how it was enacted, at the micro level. The interview questions used in the administrator interview were similar to those in the teacher interviews, with slight modifications.

Administrator Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself, years of experience, and current professional title.
2. How did you first hear about PBIS?
3. Why do you support PBIS?
4. How did you feel about PBIS when you were first introduced to it?
5. How did you go about wrapping your head around PBIS at our school?
6. How did you prepare to implement PBIS?
7. What is PBIS to you?
8. What is it NOT?
9. How do you feel about PBIS?
10. Describe what PBIS looked like in our building.
11. What is your understanding of PBIS as an education policy?
12. How did you share your PBIS-related expectations with staff? Families?
13. What does PBIS look like when implemented with fidelity?
14. Will you briefly summarize your perspective about implementing PBIS at the high school level?
15. What struggles did you face implementing PBIS at the high school level?
16. What would you change about PBIS implementation?

Interview Advantages & Limitations

Creswell and Creswell (2018) attributed several advantages to the use of interviews, noting interviews can be useful when participants cannot be directly observed, such as the case of teacher enactment of PBIS. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that interviews allow the researcher to control the questioning while creating opportunities for participants to provide historical information about an experience or phenomenon that may not be available to a researcher otherwise.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated several limitations to the use of interviews as a research method, noting research participants may not be equally perceptive and articulate about their experiences. In the case of this study, teachers' responses may have been influenced or biased by my presence as the researcher and a colleague (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) pointed out that information provided by research participants may be filtered or sanitized for the purpose of the interview. I attempted to minimize the effect of this limitation through sensemaking as a theoretical framework, which sought to honor participants' stories as they confronted their own experiences.

Data Analysis & Sensemaking

Patrick and Joshi (2019) presented the sensemaking perspective as a method to understand how individuals incorporate prior experiences, beliefs, and contexts when constructing meanings of new ideas, including how teachers reframe new practices they are asked to implement. I applied a sensemaking perspective and constructivist worldview to my deductive coding process to create a list of themes I wanted to explore in the data. While codes were predetermined, some of their definitions evolved as my analysis progressed (Xu & Zammit, 2020). The introduction of a new policy such as PBIS forces teachers to respond to a disruption in their normal teaching protocol, while constructing and interpreting new meanings, forcing reconciliation of new ideas with personal beliefs and previous practices (Patrick & Joshi, 2019). Patrick and Joshi (2019) argued that teachers often focus on superficial aspects of policies, significantly altering policy intentions, and sensemaking assumes these changes to policy happen through the lens of prior personal knowledge. This results in an over-interpretation of ideas, resulting in less actionable changes under political mandates in the classroom. In my analysis, I looked for themes and codes aligned to ideas that related to sensemaking, such as prior beliefs,

changes over time, previous experiences, and school norms and expectations. These codes uncovered teacher construction of meaning through their environments, how prior knowledge was used to make sense of new information, and how meaning was personal and contextual. How teachers explain their understanding of PBIS created a greater understanding of which aspects of policy they chose to embrace. Patterns in the data revealed teachers' actions in confirming or confronting policy at the local level.

Implications of the Study

The implications of this study are constructivist. I worked with teacher participants to construct understandings based on themes interpreted in the semi-structured interviews (Hatch, 2002). I hope this work helped teachers reflect and find their own voice when it comes to policy that shapes day-to-day classroom practices through lived, shared experiences. Whether or not teachers want to accept their role as political actors, teachers must recognize their own importance as actors who enact policy at the micro level. Teachers actively translate information all day long, policy included. I hope participation in these interviews encourages teachers to think before they implement. Teachers have choice and agency in the decisions they make in the classroom, and I believe teachers have the space to think in critical ways before they buy into federal, state, or local policies. Sensemaking is a complicated concept because it can sometimes inhibit change by limiting thinking about new concepts, but it is a critical part of the process. Teachers must be encouraged to make policy their own before they accept new mandates without critical reflection. I do not see a major shift reducing neoliberal policies in the U.S., so educators must become smarter and more deliberate about how they engage with policy. This includes encouraging and educating preservice educators about political engagement, understanding, and critical reflection about educational policy. Policy should not be accepted and enacted as black and white or as fact. Policy is a living, breathing endeavor that is never fully resolved.

Aside from the benefits I hope this research presents for teachers, administrators and interest groups who support teachers and students can use this research study in advocacy work. We need better informed policy makers. It is not necessarily that every actor who creates policy does so with malice, but the conversation around education policy needs to be opened to include a wider, more diverse circle of policy makers and policy constructors before policy is even drafted. Waiting to include teachers in the policy conversation until it is time to implement new

ideas almost certainly means a major translation from the original intentions of the policy as drafted. Future researchers can use this study to continue the examination of the roles of teachers in changing existing policy. There is also a need for future researchers to examine the role of teachers as policy enactors when attempting to measure the success of a policy, which I did not have the space to examine in this research study.

Conclusion

While teacher interviews seek to explore constructed experiences of those responsible for shaping policy, this research was a bounded study in the sense that it is only a snapshot in time. Policy creation, construction, and translation are ever changing, especially as administrations change at the federal and state levels and as districts and schools face changes in leadership and turnover in teaching staff. This research sought to explore a single education policy, PBIS, and what it looks like at various stages of creation and construction at one moment in time, in one school, through the lens of teacher voice. Semi-structured interviews were invaluable in shaping this understanding. Interviews allowed me to explore overlap and divergence in themes from teacher perspectives compared to administrative perspectives, which led to a more thorough understanding about how those in formal roles of leadership communicate about policy and change. Through the selection of a diverse interview pool, I aimed to include differing perspectives on PBIS and to offer alternative viewpoints on how teachers enact policy (Young & Diem, 2018). Using CPA along with sensemaking aided in my analysis. As Young and Diem (2018) noted, CPA examines all actors in the political process and seeks to reframe them by revealing what it can about policy construction, which allowed me to access the stories of teachers included in this study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Themes

This qualitative study sought to understand how teachers make sense of new policies as they are introduced at the building level. During this study, all teacher participants were involved in a multiyear rollout of PBIS in their school building and had been engaged either as part of leadership teams, committees, or as teachers enacting policy in their classrooms. The participants experienced many challenges throughout the PBIS rollout. Just as PBIS interventions gained momentum, the research site shut down in the spring of 2020 due to the COVID pandemic. When students finally returned to the classroom full-time and in-person, PBIS was no longer at the forefront of building concerns. As classrooms started to look more like they did prior to the pandemic, PBIS again became a focus of building-level leadership. In the spring of 2023, the building principal, who had been in place since the launch of PBIS at the research site, announced his departure, once again shifting the relationship between policy rhetoric and reality for many teachers in the building.

Despite numerous challenges and changes amidst their experiences with PBIS, teachers at the research site seemed ready for a change. This context underscores why it is essential to understand how these teachers approached sensemaking and policy enactment with PBIS, as a thread that wove its way through all of these experiences. The lessons learned may provide insight into how teachers may carry out or impede policy-based changes in light of real, day-to-day struggles in the classroom, including a global pandemic and a transfer of leadership.

For the purpose of this qualitative study, I focused on interviews with teachers serving at a large midwestern high school in the U.S. I conducted five interviews with teachers from the research site and one administrator interview. All teacher participants had at least one year of teaching experience along with one year of experience implementing PBIS-based practices in the school setting. The former administrator at the research site was interviewed to understand his intentions with PBIS and to contrast his responses with the sensemaking teachers experienced in their enactment of policy.

Research Question

This qualitative study was guided by the following research question:

How do teachers make sense of and enact complex education policies, such as PBIS?

The findings from my semi-structured interviews are presented through the stories of participants. Each story is a summary of the data gathered from the participating teachers, with a focus on the themes that arose through our conversations. I assigned pseudonyms to protect the identities of each research participant. These stories help uncover how this set of teachers made sense of school and district decisions related to PBIS, as they constructed meaning and actions in their classrooms.

Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews

As noted in Chapter 3, I relied on semi-structured teacher interviews with 13 possible demographic and open-ended questions, with the responses of participants guiding the conversation. If a teacher had already addressed the question in a previous response or it did not seem relevant, it was moved in the structure of the interview or skipped altogether. Follow-up questions were used for clarification and to respond to participants' interpretations of PBIS.

Participant 1: Jennifer

Jennifer, an experienced educator with 17 years of experience, has been at the research site for the last six. She is driven by leadership opportunities in the district. She believes in research and the impact that education programs like PBIS can have for students: "What I had to keep telling myself was that students are a product of the environment that they're in." She seeks out ways to grow herself as an educator and uses PBIS to do that, even while grappling with the realities of education policies— "For me, it's affirming that I'm doing a good job, and I'm worth something to our space, and people recognize what I'm able to bring to the table."

A thread that appeared consistently in Jennifer's story with PBIS was the opportunity for leadership. The chance to gain leadership experience and recognition for her hard work was a driving force for Jennifer as she became more formally involved and comfortable with PBIS in the building. Jennifer was hesitant in her initial relationship with PBIS because she had been trained in other behavior management strategies, including conscious discipline, but once building administrators started to include her as a teacher leader, she embraced PBIS. Her initial hesitancy was largely related to first needing to make sense of a new strategy, but she respects frameworks and initiatives that work and that are based in research:

> I actually did social emotional training for teachers to implement into classrooms (in a past position). My hesitation was more in the sense of I was so heavily trained in another behavior management system, that trying to wrap my head around another method and way of managing behaviors, when a different strategy was so ingrained in me. That's where a lot of the hesitation first came. I see where the parallels are and have made adjustments to how I implement PBIS strategies in my classroom, so those skills that are so heavily ingrained in me, because they're based in research. And I know that they work and just kind of found a way to marry them both, that way I'm still meeting the requirements of what my building requires for me.

Once she was able to connect her new knowledge with leadership opportunities, she felt more confident:

> This is selfish of me. It's really opened up additional leadership roles for me within the district. And I complain sometimes about knowing you're good at your job when you are "voluntold" or asked to take on more responsibilities. And having been requested to be on the tier one team, and having been requested to be one of the Check-In/Check-Out (CICO) adults, it's affirming that I'm doing a good job and I'm worth something in our space and that people recognize what I'm able to bring to the table, not just in instruction, but to help support our students' mental health and social emotional skills within the classroom. So, I guess, for me it's just selfish.

Jennifer embraced the leadership opportunity through PBIS as she participated in day-long professional development opportunities with other teacher leaders, building leadership, and district leadership. Over the course of our interview, Jennifer acknowledged that difficulties exist when introducing a new program like PBIS, but personalized experiences with the leadership team, opportunities to take on a greater responsibility, and space to create her own understanding of PBIS made a difference in how she approached it as a school-wide requirement. Jennifer was unfamiliar with PBIS initially but found confidence in continually being invited to participate as she stayed part of the selected leadership group, even as the rollout evolved in the building. She was invited to participate on the tier one team after the rollout had started, but this didn't stop her from continuing to strive for the best version of PBIS she could manage in her classroom. As tier two became a greater focus in the building, she was selected as a CICO adult. These adults greet a small number of identified students each morning, which some educators may see as an added

burden, but Jennifer saw this as yet another chance to be included in a leadership role. Jennifer welcomed each time PBIS allowed her to be more involved and more purposeful in her work in the classroom.

In addition to the importance that leadership opportunities had in Jennifer's original buy-in to PBIS, her ability to connect new knowledge to previous knowledge was crucial. Jennifer acknowledged that she had in-depth, preexisting knowledge about student behavior, and while initially a limitation, she quickly found a way to turn that knowledge into an advantage. Once Jennifer was able to use prior knowledge to make sense of new knowledge presented with PBIS, she was able to overcome her initial hesitation and meet the accountability expectations for teacher enactment of PBIS in the building. She did not speak of the building requirements related to PBIS as something she was obligated to do, but rather part of the cycle of building knowledge. Where others might have identified PBIS as another task on their plate, Jennifer challenged herself to acclimate to the changes:

> I was so heavily trained in another behavior management system that trying to wrap my head around another method and way of managing behaviors, when a different strategy was so ingrained in me, that's where a lot of the hesitation first came. I see where the parallels are and have adjusted how I implement PBIS strategies in my classroom.

Jennifer went on to explain that finding ways to combine previous knowledge with new knowledge was not the only way she approached her own sensemaking with PBIS. She considered her knowledge as both a parent and an educator to determine what is good for kids, even when data collection was involved. She spoke frequently about the importance of communicating expectations with students, which led to her belief that PBIS is less about controlling student behavior and more about setting students up for success down the line. She allows her students to help define what PBIS looks like in her classroom space to encourage student buy-in through knowledge construction. In general, she viewed PBIS as a method for teaching expectations in a way that supports students. A key part of PBIS in any building is the collection of data to aid in decision making. Jennifer expressed some reticence about data collection as it connected to PBIS, though she never explicitly marked this as an oppressive aspect of the building requirements.

> It's important that behavior is a data point. But there's so many other factors that play into behavior in the classroom, and I didn't want that to get lost in the midst of gathering

> data points to make changes that are good for kids. You can only gather so many data points. But trauma in a kid's life is gonna kind of trump some of those data points.

Overall, Jennifer seemed positive about the enactment of PBIS in her classroom and the building, though she recognized that not all her colleagues felt the same. She expressed that in conversations at the professional development provided for the PBIS leadership team, there were good conversations about where the program is going, with enthusiasm and care for teachers as part of that. Her own evolution with PBIS depended on the self-assurance that she knew how to do it and that she was doing it right. She thinks all teachers need that opportunity to grow with PBIS: "We have to have done to us what we want our teachers to be doing in their own spaces."

Participant 2: Avery

Avery is an enthusiastic new teacher with one year in a previous district that implemented PBIS, but she is brand new to the research site. Her understanding of school policies and state mandates are largely shaped by the trust she has for her district and leadership—"I'm going to trust the district. And I'm gonna trust that I chose the correct place to work and that I trust the administrators to pursue behavior management strategies and resources that make sense for our kids." She understands that, as a new teacher, she may not have the knowledge others may have about programs or frameworks the district chooses to implement, but she is a self-described "sponge." She is largely compliant in what the district asks of her: "I would adapt to pretty much whatever the current philosophy was."

Avery was neutral in her feelings towards PBIS and did not express issues with it nor resistance or hesitation to implement behavioral supports as she has experienced them in the district, but she also did not seem overly stressed about restructuring her classroom to focus on a local mandate. She worries more about how she prioritizes her time with students:

> I hope that PBIS is being implemented, but I don't feel myself necessarily panicking if I maybe didn't prioritize it, or if I feel like something could have been more obviously used. And maybe I forgot, or maybe I overlooked something, but I think my main focus in the first week of school has been to teach well and hopefully, the rest of the things will follow.

This focus on common sense tied together much of Avery's thinking as she discussed her experiences with PBIS. She views PBIS less as an accountability policy shaping teacher actions

in the classroom and more as something to which all educators can adhere: "That goes down to just common sense. Every human should be safe, responsible, and respectful." She shared that her last district, considerably smaller than her current district, had fewer people who were trained and able to check up on teachers as they enacted PBIS. For that reason, she regards her current district as a "more serious" take on the tiered support interventions. Her previous experience was about keeping her head above water; her current experience is about knowledge-building as she tries to wrap her head around district policies: "I think my understanding of the tiers was all wrong, because now I get it. But last year I didn't. And again, I just was like smile and nod!"

With more professional development and more opportunity to understand PBIS, Avery noted she would likely have more curiosity about the cons of the framework. She spoke frequently about wanting the chance to ask more questions, to better understand PBIS, and to learn about any negatives, so she can avoid those traps— "If that is a potential roadblock, how do we *not* do that?" Lack of information and professional knowledge also impacted how she chose to approach PBIS with families in the district at the start of the school year. As she explained:

> I don't plan on defining it or explaining it (PBIS). And part of that's probably being new to the game in the sense, "Oh, my gosh! What if a parent asked me a question that I didn't know the answer to?" And then I'm thinking, "Oh, now I look like a fool."

While mentioning that she thinks it's a positive to reward desired behaviors, she questioned potential barriers to enacting PBIS at the local level when it produces one group of students who are rewarded for "good behavior" and always to get the attention, leaving other students behind: "Even if I'm not a bad kid, maybe I'm just an average kid, but I don't do enough to get praised." The undefined middle space of the local policy rollout leaves too much up to chance.

When asked a follow-up question about whether PBIS aligned with her teaching philosophy and classroom practices, Avery identified a point of view as a new teacher that I had not considered—if a new teacher is only exposed to a single strategy, that strategy is likely what they will use:

> The resources that you are given are what you're going to use, right? So, I don't know if I have a great answer to that question, because I'm not necessarily practiced in any other strategies, other than maybe just my instinct.

Her response called to attention her sensemaking, which is reliant on a more limited prior knowledge base that will expand exponentially with time and exposure. Avery has not been introduced to multiple behavior management plans, nor has she had a chance to implement other strategies. She has, however, been asked to enact the same policy in multiple districts. She is dependent on her, so far, limited experiences, where much of her knowledge is constructed on what others, including administrators, choose to share with her. She relies heavily on professional development, staff meetings, and what others offer to share with her about their own knowledge, leading to a collective knowledge of policy.

For Avery, like other teacher participants in the interviews, compliance and enactment rested on the matrix. When asked about her own role implementing PBIS, she responded: "Well, I've been asked to make a matrix, that was fine." Over the course of the interviews, not just for Avery, but for many teachers, producing and displaying a classroom matrix, which explicitly states the classroom expectations as aligned to the four guiding words of safe, responsible, respectful, and kind, was *the* expectation for PBIS implementation. Avery, like the others, was compliant in this district mandate. The classroom matrix is one of the only concrete ways teachers can demonstrate their compliance with the policy.

Avery returned to her theory that PBIS is less about district policy and more about common sense—naming something that teachers are already doing in the classroom. She viewed her actions not as those of a political actor enforcing or disrupting a policy, but as good teaching and a strategy that comes naturally. She is an optimist and believes PBIS is simply a way to label the behaviors teachers are exhibiting. When asked about how she had prepared to implement district expectations around PBIS, she said:

> I think that a lot of PBIS happens naturally because we talk about clear expectations and acknowledging appropriate behavior and responding to inappropriate behavior and things that happen naturally as a teacher. Most of those things are already happening in this room. I just don't put a label on it. We spent the first two days of class going over expectations and practicing them. So, I think that even though it's kind of just … happening, naturally, I guess.

Even with no knowledge about PBIS as a formal policy ("practically nothing, to be honest"), Avery embraced her optimistic viewpoint to continue enacting the parts of PBIS that work best to support student success. As a young educator who is also new to the district, Avery's

experiences with PBIS reveals unique insight into sensemaking as she finds her place in a new setting, while building a relationship with a new policy.

Participant 3: Ruth

Ruth is a veteran teacher with 29 years of teaching experience, 22 years at the high school level, and currently serves as a department chair while teaching freshman and advanced classes. She has experienced many mandates in her teaching career, and while respectful of what her district asks of her, she was skeptical to accept yet another "educational acronym that would go by the wayside in a few years, when the trend, for whatever it was that made us have the trend to begin with, was gone, had run its course."

Ruth expressed comfort and confidence with her critical viewpoint. She is not outwardly against mandates that her district asks of her, but she is cautious when introduced to the next new trend in education. Her professional experiences have taught her there is accountability when teachers are asked to enact policy, but she extends that accountability to the district. She desires *more* out of her district and leadership before deciding her own role as a political actor:

> I remember when it was unrolled, I was like what even is this. How did they choose the people on the committee? Why are we doing this? Are we really going to just pay lip service to this? Or are we really going to go all in with this? And, if we are going to go all in with this, that's a huge culture shift, which will take a lot of time, which is fine, but it doesn't seem like we've really done that, other than hanging some matrices, and, you know, some buzzwords.

Issues of trust shape her skepticism around the "next acronym." She sees promise in the values PBIS encourages, especially kindness, in creating a positive culture shift. While tentative to accept PBIS and local level implementation decisions at surface level, she sees an opportunity to impact staff buy-in:

> I think that we, as educators, could learn a thing or two about those acronyms, you know? How do you have a respectful disagreement with an administrator over something? Or how do you talk about your department chair when you don't really see eye to eye with your department chair, in a way that's somewhat respectful and somewhat kind, even if you disagree? I think we need to teach these things and *not* just to the kids. We do need to teach these things to the kids, but we need to model them ourselves.

Ruth understands that, like many mandates she has encountered during her career, time can be a barrier to the success of PBIS implementation. Staff buy-in takes time, professional development to educate teachers takes time, positively impacting school culture takes time. Perhaps what may take the most time is the consistency and authenticity Ruth considers critical to the success of PBIS at the high school level. When asked what PBIS looks like when implemented with fidelity, she answered:

> If we were really using it with fidelity, that would be more part of our culture instead of the incentive rewards. I find that giving those gets—you know, I don't carry them with me, and just the issuance of them—a little inorganic for me. I think if it's used with fidelity, those things happen just with a little bit more authenticity and more regularity.

Her frustration with local rollout is palpable and not necessarily misplaced. If the building, and the district, are going to be successful in affecting culture through PBIS, teachers need greater experiences that allow them to make sense of what they are being asked to implement. Teachers at the research site have lived with this mandate, at least in part, since the 2016–2017 academic year, and, as Ruth shared, teachers are ready to get to the core of PBIS.

> If we want it to be successful, we need to keep it on the front burners. We need not to just let it simmer in the background, saying, oh, the matrix is done! Don't we have cute posters? Go us. Let's draw the name out of the hat once a month and move on. I think that because we do have people talking about it again, and with the matrix being the bigger posters, it seems to me that the high school, and the district, definitely does want us to keep focus on it, and maybe we'll get a little bit more common instruction, dialogue, etc. surrounding PBIS, and how we as teachers can implement it more authentically, less forced, and maybe people will buy into it a little bit more because we see, Okay, this isn't going away. It didn't go away with Covid. And now that we're sort of "normal" again, we can start to use PBIS with more fidelity across the building.

Ruth discussed other complications in teacher sensemaking about PBIS, including muddied top-down expectations. The district is simultaneously rolling out PBIS, 7 Mindsets, and Portrait of a Graduate, which have blurred the expectations for teachers so much that Ruth believes teachers are no longer able to make sense of them or do any one of them well: "It's all these different scattered pieces of programs that really fall flat because there's so many of them. How can we really focus on one of them?" PBIS asks teachers to consider tiers of support that

include incentives for positive behaviors centered around the keywords respectful, responsible, safe, and kind. Similarly related, but separate in rollout and expectation, is 7 Mindsets. Focused on social and emotional learning (SEL), 7 Mindsets defines itself as a common language that allows an individual to find happiness (7 Mindsets, n.d.). Identified by their meta-analysis, 7 Mindsets (n.d.) generated a separate list of keywords including optimism, creativity, passion, purpose, open-mindedness, relationships, service to others, and gratitude. Portrait of a Graduate is an initiative to help school districts identify shared aspirations to share with the greater school community (Battelle for Kids, n.d.). Portrait of a Graduate identified five roles for students under the vision in the strategic plan including engaged collaborator, lifelong learner, critical thinking, thoughtful communicator, and global citizen (Kettering Schools, 2019).

With so many buzzwords and expectations around teacher implementation, it is easy to understand why Ruth feels the need to question not only the complicated expectations of teachers, but what is best for students.

> Which is the best for kids? Is there one we should just do really, really well, and then move on to the 7 Mindsets? And then move on to the Portrait of the Graduate? But it seems like we are throwing things at the wall, thinking something might stick. Where it's all just sort of muddy…

Ruth wants initiatives like PBIS to be successful if they are what work for students: "I do think that it has potential for being a positive culture shift." She also recognizes that the amount of work teachers are expected to take on to make sense of all of these mandates, along with a distrust of administration during part of the rollout, has complicated the process. "How do we do it? The *why* behind it, rather than being told to do it by administration," is key for her to get on board with all that PBIS asks of teachers. She wants buy-in to happen not because it is what teachers are supposed to do, but because it comes from people she trusts and respects telling her why it is a good thing for students and the school.

Participant 4: Glen

Glen is a mid-career teacher who spent five years in a previous district before spending the last eight years at the research site. Glen is calm, thoughtful, and humorous in his responses about PBIS, and shows a strong focus on student well-being, regardless of what politics or

mandates are attached to his actions. Glen consistently put school culture and students at the forefront of his thinking about PBIS.

> PBIS, I think, is having student well-being, and to get student engagement in the classroom academically, and to really plug into the culture that students have, to feel like they are welcomed, and students have a place to belong.

In addition to student well-being and school culture, the application of common sense tied much of Glen's thinking about PBIS together. He relied on approaches that made sense for students and in the classroom, without worrying about connections to policy or mandates to guide his decisions. While Avery exhibited common sense thinking in her interview, Glen, as a more veteran teacher, also related to the frustration that many feel when they don't know where an educational mandate is going: "I'd like to know what's the end goal. When this is at full implementation, what should our school look like that it doesn't look like right now?" As we spoke, he often reflected about instructional practices and changes over time in his classroom and, like other participants in these interviews, seemed to attribute these decisions to the evolution of good teaching practices and not the introduction of an educational policy.

Glen had experienced another program aimed at student well-being in his previous district. Under the leadership of his past district superintendent, Glen was introduced to 40 Developmental Assets, a framework by the Search Institute, which uses 40 positive supports to help students find success through external and internal assets (Search Institute, 2023). Glen described the 40 Developmental Assets framework as "PBIS-ish, but very different." He did not view either 40 Developmental Assets or PBIS as life changing frameworks that have overhauled his teaching but reflected on how such programs have altered his classroom practices in small ways over the course of his career. Glen utilizes conversation frequently in his classroom and noted that controversial topics have become big in culture and society and are one area where he directly rethought his approach. Currently, he has students write out their feelings and opinions first, followed by research to support or challenge their thinking. Next, students share their opinions about an issue in small groups, before sharing their thoughts to the whole class, building trust and slowly scaffolding their confidence in tackling divergent opinions in a group. Glen never explicitly referred to this practice as any sort of enactment of PBIS, though kindness and respect, two PBIS focus words at the research site, were in the foreground of his teaching:

> For controversial topics this is a lot of work, clearly, but for controversial topics, it's basically the best thing that I've found to do for now. It's not what I was doing 12 years ago, and I probably wish I had. But there are topics that we talk about in class, especially now, that we weren't talking about 12 years ago and weren't tiptoeing around making sure we're careful not to offend.

Listening to Glen share the structure of his classroom, I was confident he would have found his way to this approach, even without PBIS. As he put it, PBIS "felt like a framework added on to what was already going on in my class," and really what was happening was simply "adding a formal definition to what was already a common practice."

Glen acknowledged that barriers exist to PBIS implementation in the building, and in his own sensemaking he identified lack of information as the biggest barrier. Until our interview, Glen was not explicitly aware that PBIS, as a framework, leaves so much of the decision making up to the local site that an explicit end goal is not part of the playbook. This knowledge affirmed his feelings about the impact of PBIS implementation:

> It felt like things changed slowly, if at all. It felt like a little bit of, not lip service, but things that we as a staff were doing. I don't know that students saw much change at all. And I think if PBIS is a policy that is focused on student success, students probably would sense that it's there, and I don't know that any students could.

He compared the teacher experience with PBIS rollout as being "consumers" of a product, in line with criticisms of PBIS as a neoliberal policy that creates marketization or incentivization of desirable behaviors (Brown et al., 2023).

Like the other participants in this research, the classroom matrix was one of the main ways Glen was able to highlight his compliance with PBIS as a local district policy. Both new and experienced teachers pointed to the matrix as a clear expectation the building leadership defined for their role as PBIS policy enactors. What set Glen apart was the effort he went to in order to make the matrix meaningful for students, likely giving it a different meaning in his classroom versus other locations in the building.

> I print them out, give them to kids, and have them partner up and act it out in skits. "Here is an example of following the matrix; here's a non-example of following the matrix." Teaching behaviors, I think, is a big part of PBIS. Being proactive in teaching and showing behaviors, rather than assuming that students know what to do and know what's

> appropriate and professional and expected. Rather than just saying it, having them act it out and experience it, and give some kind of ... I used to think that was a more middle school thing is like, all right, we're going to go through and physically practice how to take our seat at the beginning of the period and take our things out and put them away, and how to move the desks around when it's time for partner work in the classroom and not bump into our neighbor, and how to have conversations with people that the disagree with us and and not roll our eyes. We're practicing not rolling our eyes.

While modeling behaviors and encouraging safe, respectful, responsible, and kind behaviors from students is not inherently negative in schooling, it is what Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) considered neoliberal control of social behaviors, where staff work to normalize a standard comportment school-wide.

Glen viewed his efforts, from the matrix to rethinking classroom procedures, to be in support of school culture, an intended outcome of PBIS. To Glen, building positive school culture means making school a place where kids want to go every day, which is an uphill battle: "I don't care if it's school or an amusement park, you have some kid go to the same place five days a week for seven or eight hours a day, they're gonna tire of it." That battle gets easier if students have a place where they are welcomed, where they belong, and are cared for, in order to help them succeed. Glen reasoned that ideally students will find success if they feel there are supports around them invested in their success—specifically people who care about their well-being.

Glen and I concluded our interview by looking forward. He inquired, "If there's no end goal, where do we go from here?" Flexibility for local decision making is a benefit for some when implementing PBIS. However, a lack of district defined end goals may lead to ambiguity and frustration on behalf of teachers. Teachers lose agency when making political enactment decisions in their classrooms if they don't know what those decisions are supporting or contesting. Glen would react more positively to a shared understanding of PBIS, with common goals among staff.

> I'd like to know what's the end goal. When this is at full implementation, what should our school look like that it doesn't look like right now? I'd like to start there and say, "All right, what's our next best right step to get there," because it feels like I don't know what our next right step is, because I don't know where we're trying to go. I think we have to

> start and reverse engineer the path to get to the end. I think we all have our own ideas, and maybe some share with me, my perception of hey, I'd like it so that every kid feels like school is a place to belong and a place to become what it is that you want to do, even if you don't know what you want to do yet. But if that end goal is this culture where that is the case, that hasn't been communicated, and I think that needs to be communicated. And then what is our next right step to get there?

Participant 5: Sam

Sam is in his 11th year of teaching and has a diverse professional background. He spent one year teaching at the elementary level at an area private school before joining the district as a middle school teacher. In his time at the middle school, he was part of the initial PBIS rollout team. He is currently in his sixth year of teaching at the research site and also adjuncts at an area college. He takes great pride in his experiences as an educator: "I like to say I've taught kindergarten to college." He brings a sense of lightheartedness to his classroom and his philosophy about PBIS. "It really just boils down to being nice to kids" was a mantra he returned to time and time again when discussing his beliefs and feelings about how he approaches his interactions with students. This approach to understanding PBIS was a common theme of participants as they strove to boil it down to its most basic essence.

As a parent with students in the district, a former middle school teacher, and a member of the initial PBIS leadership team at the middle school, Sam provided a sense of knowledge and understanding that was unique to his experiences. He joined the leadership team as a new teacher at the request of a new principal, sharing, "My brand new principal called me and said, 'Will you be on this team?' And I said, 'Yes,' because I thought I'm new, and he's new, and I want to make a good impression." This facilitated a sense of buy-in to PBIS similar to what Jennifer shared in her experiences with the rollout. Engaging teachers early and at high levels in the process generally led to more positive views of PBIS, compared to participants who more passively received information from the top-down. Despite this early engagement, Sam acknowledged changes in time about his thinking:

> I think I went through a little bit of the jaded period. I went from higher than most, to where I was a little jaded, and then I came back to like somewhere in the middle of, "This is good. This is good stuff. I like the data. I like what I'm hearing from the teacher who

> does data analysis and that team." And then we're trying to address it in the hallways, or whatever, so I ultimately would say, I am for it, but I've had a journey.

As part of his journey with PBIS, Sam identified misconceptions with PBIS, including "that it's too lovey-dovey or too everybody gets a sticker, and nobody gets in trouble, and we're not holding kids accountable." In our interview, Sam pointed out that when teachers are making sense of new policies, one of the greatest risks is that misconceptions become reality. Teachers in the district grappled with sensemaking around the mandate, which may have led to even more confusion about PBIS:

> I think in some cases that's what happened here. PBIS was rolled out parallel with all the challenges that every school district is facing. I think we would have had the issues with phones and kid behavior declining a little bit or changing and then, when that happened while PBIS was being rolled out, I think people pointed to PBIS and thought it was the problem.

Even Sam himself wrestled with whether dueling frameworks, PBIS and RTI, rolled out concurrently in the district, were related. "All that came out at once, and it was a lot of information. That was overwhelming, I think, for a lot of people." Bornstein (2017) noted both PBIS and RTI were intended as inclusionary practices to give all students access to high-quality expectations and instruction in schooling and are sometimes used interchangeably (Bornstein, 2017). Conflicting ideas and multiplicity are struggles that many educators face with policy enactment. März and Kelchtermans (2013) argued that such complications in sensemaking force teachers to construct meaning in ways that further shape their actions, as they are challenged to decide what is better or best for students, while simultaneously trying to understand reforms or policies.

As with every teacher I interviewed for this research, Sam pointed to the matrix as his main method of compliance. For educators as the research site, the matrix has become a constant, visible, actionable item of PBIS enactment, even when other pieces of the policy construction puzzle have been muddy. What is less clear, despite high levels of compliance with classroom matrices, is just how effective the matrix is for students. When we discussed what PBIS looks like in his classroom, Sam recognized just how different enactment looks at different grade levels in the district. He has a matrix in his classroom and makes an effort to be nice to kids but

doesn't do as much as he once did at the middle school, where he was more intentional. He is the parent of elementary students in the district, where he feels PBIS is highly impactful, and said:

> For my girls at the elementary school, it's awesome. They're into it. They love those incentives, it's great. And I know it doesn't have to look the same there as it does here. Obviously it doesn't. But it's very effective there for my kids, who are pretty good kids and are going to follow the rules anyway, but they also like that extra incentive to make good choices and be responsible.

Sam thinks being positive and encouraging to kids at the high school level is key but questions if he needs a matrix on his wall to do that. He thinks it's important that we have a school where there are kind teachers, focused on good teaching, and that most kids think their teachers are nice: "Whether there's PBIS or not, that's super important, for a great high school like this is."

I asked Sam if he thought his actions in the classroom would look different if the district had not adopted PBIS. He replied, "I'm dancing around PBIS, but I would be doing that anyway, had it never happened, I think." This sense of accidental compliance presented itself several times over the course of teacher interviews, when several participants mentioned they are compliant with PBIS not because it is what's expected of them, but because some of the common-sense approaches associated with it at the local level are at the root of good teaching. Teacher participants, Sam included, said they are not intentionally "doing PBIS;" they rely on common sense and good teaching practices to guide classroom decisions and positive interactions with students are part of that. Sam contemplated how his interactions with other teachers, especially early on as a second-year teacher, helped shape his approach to PBIS:

> I remember talking to teachers more individually, and ultimately, I changed my mind. I've never been anti-PBIS, but the teachers helped me come to that realization of, "Sam, I do that anyway. I am nice to kids. I am doing that. I am positive with kids." And some of them (veteran teachers) were grumpier than others about it, but I think most of us are, or most of them are, doing that stuff, anyway, so I'm not anti-PBIS at all.

While accidental compliance may have been a byproduct of the PBIS rollout at the high school, one feature of the PBIS framework that is not coincidental is the reliance on data to inform building and district decision making.

Sam appreciates the importance of data gathering and usage, though, like other aspects of PBIS, he hopes administration would be using data in similar ways, even if PBIS was not

mandated. He advocated for a more transparent use of data, supporting students being aware of the data as well. Discussing the data team, which includes administration and at least one teacher, who examine the collected discipline data, Sam described how he envisioned that process happening once a problem area is identified:

> Say bathrooms are the issue. Okay, we should focus on bathrooms, and that doesn't necessarily mean I need to stand in front of my class and talk about how to appropriately use the restrooms, but I can say, "You guys better not be vaping because we're coming after you this year. That's our point of emphasis."

Sam expanded on the use of data and his point of emphasis analogy, connecting his policy thinking to his love of sports.

> Pass interference was a big issue last year (in the NFL), so they called it a point of emphasis. Our point of emphasis we are going after, or we're really watching for, is pass interference. We always were, but now we're really focused on it. So, I think, take that data, and call it points of emphasis, or whatever you want to call it, and this is our focus this year. I think teachers would … That's the good stuff that they would agree with because it looks like we're trying to change behaviors, to make this a better school, not just trying to be overly nice to kids and avoid conflict with parents, which is what your cynical teachers would say about PBIS, I think.

Making real decisions based on real data was an area of PBIS where Sam felt the district excelled. He looked back at the initial PBIS rollout meetings where a representative from Midwest PBIS Network (MWPBIS) advised that "you're not going to get it all right in the first year, two, three, even four." Now that the district is eight years into the rollout process, Sam thinks teachers are seeing progress and hopes that progress is driven using data, an added value of PBIS.

To wrap up our interview, I offered Sam one last chance to add anything he felt relevant to the conversation. I was hopeful when he remarked:

> When you told me that, for 30 minutes we'll talk about PBIS, and I thought *of course* we will. I will probably answer yes or no, and I'll have nothing else to say. I can't believe you've gotten me to talk this long about it. I didn't know I had so much to say.

Teachers do have a lot to say, and I believe through research studies like this, which highlight teacher voice, they will begin to recognize their own agency as policy actors in an ever-expanding policy arena.

Semi-Structured Administrator Interview

In the early framing of this study, I envisioned only using teacher voice to understand policy enactment at the local level. As I became more involved in the research, I realized an understanding of PBIS at the administrative level would help me better interpret how PBIS made its way to teachers. As much as teachers use their prior knowledge, individual experiences, and collective sensemaking to enact policy in their classrooms, much of what they had access to to make these decisions rested on the actions of administrators. In interviews with the past building-level administrator in charge of PBIS rollout, I sought to understand how he himself made sense of education policy before disseminating the information to staff, families, and students. Like the teacher interviews, I relied on a semi-structured approach with 16 possible demographic and open-ended questions, as noted in Chapter 3.

Administrator Participant: Thomas

Thomas is a dedicated educator with many years at the research site, in different roles. He takes great pride in his roles as an educator, transitioning from teacher to administrator in the building. He is heavily visible in the community at everything from academic ceremonies to sporting events. He is a leader in education and makes it a point to be present with students, even as he transitioned roles again as this research started and his position changed to a job outside the district. He was eager to share successes of the building but was also able to accept when things could have gone better as he reflected on PBIS: “I would have found a way to try to include more staff (in) those initial phases.” But with any new initiative, it’s often being constructed as it’s being enacted, and it becomes difficult to know where to start— “But I never would have known that initially.”

Accountability took on many forms in Thomas’s understanding of PBIS. Accountability was not strictly about reporting to the State, though reporting student data is part of the formal policy that inspired many districts to implement PBIS: “There’s really no PBIS police out there figuring out how, checking to see if our high school is doing it, or our district is doing it.”

Thomas spoke more often about accountability in terms of holding staff responsible for making decisions based on data. Bornstein (2017) referred to the anecdotal use of data analysis, which was something that happened at the research site prior to the implementation of PBIS:

> I believe the last year and a half or two years has really helped the building make some decisions on what they were going to focus on. I think prior to that, it was "What do you think the focus area should be?" Everybody kind of came to a consensus and said, "Yeah, we should work on hallways." Or "Yeah, we should work on the Commons." And now there's concrete data that says the hallways are an issue, and they're especially an issue between third and seventh period, or they are an issue before school, so we've got to make some changes. And we didn't have that before. I think that's really going to impact the building in a positive way as we keep getting more and more data to make decisions.

Teachers I interviewed generally agreed that providing evidence for the decision-making process was a positive aspect of PBIS implementation, taking accountability out of the neoliberal policy realm and to a place where there was a reason for the actions of administrators. Teachers welcomed the idea of data and accountability if it *meant* something—and not something that existed simply to control students and staff.

Thomas too was able to identify where the rollout of multiple frameworks simultaneously built bridges for some teachers, as it did between RTI and PBIS, but became a barrier for understanding for others. Both initiatives focused on multi-tiered supports for students, but RTI focused on academics, and PBIS focused on behavior; this was not always clearly delineated for staff in the building. The district was a leader in academic supports, but Thomas realized quickly that the building was behind when it came to PBIS and behavioral supports, even though it was something that had been talked about for quite a while in the world of education. PBIS had been introduced at the elementary level but was delayed in coming to the secondary level, which may be one reason some teacher participants mentioned that it feels more suited to elementary than high school. Thomas felt one thing the district and leadership could have done better to help teachers with the initial rollout and enactment of PBIS was achieving a better balance of delivering information, noting that "It's always a balance in a large high school. How many people to include in initial trainings, especially when it's something that you really aren't familiar with yourself." Given the chance to do it all over again, he would make an increased

effort to include more staff, which had a direct impact on at least two participants, Jessica and Sam, and their sensemaking process.

> I would have found a way to try to include more staff in those initial phases. That initial core group, which had representation across all areas of our building, as you know, you can have two teachers, but that doesn't mean it's representative of the whole teaching staff, but I never would have known that initially, because I didn't. I was learning the same way.

The teachers I interviewed were less concerned with lack of representation than lack of information. Inclusion, transparency, and a well-defined timeline could have changed some participants' relationship with PBIS.

As Thomas's staff grappled with their own sensemaking and decisions about policy enactment, so did he. Bornstein (2017) noted in his study that many leaders want to include all students and believe that PBIS can help them achieve that. Thomas was clear about his purpose with PBIS—setting students up for success: "Whether that be academically or socially, we're trying to set students up for success. And I think that there's a misperception sometimes that that's only academically." Setting students up for success largely depended on culture-building and expectation-building for Thomas, but there were misconceptions to battle first.

> I think the biggest shift for staff was that we were so used to—we all grew up in the time of rules and regulations—you can't do this, you can't do this, you can't do this, instead of you *should* be doing this. And that's a shift in your thought process when you're educating kids around behavior.

Part of the shift in educating staff about different ways to approach behavior included fostering collective sensemaking about defining expectations in the matrix. In the first year of the PBIS rollout, the focus was building-wide expectations with a behavior matrix that addressed the whole school. At the beginning of year two of the rollout, teachers were grouped by content area to determine expectations.

> We wanted all our biology teachers together, because we felt that there were things within the realm of teaching biology, there are expectations that are very similar. One of my worries was, we have so many teachers at our school, that you have 18 sections of biology, which means you probably have six or seven teachers that teach it. You have one teacher with all these expectations over here that are vastly different than the

> expectations here. Although we wanted teachers to have flexibility to create expectations for their individual classroom, we felt that there should be quite a bit of overlap, for like classes.

This approach supported collective sensemaking, but administrators worked to include teacher agency and classroom-level decisions, while encouraging overlap between like-courses in order to maintain consistency for students.

With accountability as a driving force around PBIS, including monitoring student behavior, data analysis, and reporting to the State, I expected program evaluation to be a bigger part of Thomas's focus when it came to implementation, though he took a real world approach to it—"I think that we see these programs, and sometimes we evaluate programs based on, does everybody meet that criteria, instead of, have we seen improvements since we started that program?" Thomas seemed to operate less from a mindset that was preoccupied with complete fidelity of PBIS implementation and more with concern for improved school culture and progress for students.

> There can never be a prescribed program in education, in my opinion. Our high school is very different than an urban high school, which is very different than a rural high school, which is different than a large high school. I mean, you have all these differences, so how that's implemented and how that's structured in our building may not work. I struggled some going to conferences, because you heard about, and I'll be honest, we presented at the national forum. I thought that was a great honor, because Midwest PBIS thought that we were doing some good things at the secondary level, but just because it worked for us doesn't mean that it's going to work for the other school. And I'm listening to other schools speak and I'm like there's no way we could do this. So, I struggle. I think that what you must do as an educator is understand the purpose.

Thomas understood his purpose— "the purpose of PBIS is for students to know what the expectations are"—as did some of the teacher participants interviewed for this study, but not everyone at the research site had the same engagement with PBIS. Some defined compliance as completing the matrix; others were uncertain about it as a standalone framework. Whether or not administration and the district-level leadership perceived the true uncertainty of staff was unclear in our interview.

Thomas was aware of some of the struggles the district and the building faced with PBIS. He knows that students, like some staff, believed that all students should innately know the expectations that PBIS explicitly teaches, causing the program to feel elementary. He shared that one of his biggest struggles as an administrator was not about actually teaching the expectations, but "just trying to help all people understand that this wasn't meant to be childish." The goal all along for Thomas was consistency:

> It's not meant to be an out for students when they misbehave. It is really designed to create consistency amongst our building, so that we all have an idea of this is what it means to be respectful in this setting. This is what it means to be safe in this setting. This is what it means to be kind in this setting, and us using, no one person can teach all of their kids, all of those things, in every setting. But as a building, as if they keep hearing these things and keep having these discussions as staff, whether that be teachers, counselors, administrators, paras. If we're using similar terminology, and we have the same general idea of what those things mean, students will learn pretty quickly.

Bornstein (2015) considered these normative standards against which we measure students as an attempt by state lawmakers to mandate the regulation of student behavior and exercise authority. No one I interviewed equated PBIS with accountability measures or a way to regulate student lives through prescribed power (Bornstein, 2015). It seemed both teachers and administration chose instead to focus on what good may come from students, regardless of what the mandate advised.

Findings Summary

In summary, the six stories shared above detail the meaning and sensemaking teachers and one administrator constructed when critically analyzing and enacting top-down policy decisions. Each participant shared their initial feelings about PBIS, their current beliefs about PBIS, and what PBIS looks like in their classroom. Their narratives provide insight into the shared experiences of teachers as they play an increasingly important role in the education policy arena. Direct quotations from the data were used to emphasize authentic teacher voices in the research, to enrich descriptions of their experiences and to support the themes that arose from the data. There were five themes that tied the participants' stories together:

1. **Common sense** is at the heart of what many teachers do, regardless of what a policy or mandate asks of them. The teacher participants were confident in trusting common sense to help them make decisions that were best for students. The application of common sense drove teacher decisions, especially for those with multiple years of experience in the classroom. They took the parts of PBIS that made the most sense and applied them to their classroom practices. Teachers who approached PBIS in this manner clearly trusted their own decision-making and used previous experiences and prior knowledge to help define what that looks like in their classrooms.
2. **Norms and school expectations** drove the purpose, beliefs, and meaning-making behind PBIS for participants. What was less clear through interviews was to what degree participants agreed with those norms and expectations. Setting a standard and finding ways for all students to meet that standard, even if it was simply being kind, was key to how participants defined PBIS.
3. **Accountability** came up in interviews with all participants, but how they defined it varied considerably. In some cases, accountability was information monitored by ODE; in others, teachers considered the collection and application of behavior data by administration to satisfy accountability measures; still others considered accountability to focus on students following defined expectations. Accountability was a theme, but a general lack of coherence led to ambiguity about how the district approaches it and who exactly is governed by such accountability measures.
4. **Compliance**, much like accountability, looked very different across participant interviews. Most participants focused more on their own self-defined compliance with the policy as opposed to any top-down defined expectations. Production of a classroom matrix was the main method of compliance for everyone I interviewed and was the only source of compliance that teachers could concretely and easily define. Participants grappled with being able to define what compliance looked like for the district when it came to full PBIS implementation.
5. **Barriers** to implementation existed across the board. Faced with multiple competing mandates, participants noted a general uncertainty about PBIS as a prescribed approach and unclear expectations for students, staff, and administrators.

As this chapter ends, it is important to note that the participants in this research were open, honest, and willing to share their journeys with PBIS as an education policy. This vulnerability is not an easy ask of staff who are still living the very mandate they are being asked to reflect upon. Over the course of these interviews, many teachers were finalizing their classroom matrices for the year and were actively redefining what PBIS enactment looked like as the research site transitioned to a new head principal. The participants in this research were an invaluable source for me as I sought to understand how teachers, through sensemaking, critical policy analysis, and their own lived experiences, define, re-define, and enact policy on a day-to-day basis. Their stories provide context for the information shared in the next chapter. In Chapter 5 I will share a summary, how five identified themes—common sense, norms and expectations, accountability, compliance, and barriers—tied all the participants together, and my recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I will reconnect with the literature about teachers and policy enactment. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore PBIS policy enactment at the local level, while highlighting the voices of teachers in the political process, in order to better understand how top-down policies are shaped and changed by teacher decisions. Data used from semi-structured interviews provided rich, thematic descriptions of the experiences of educators as policy actors, how they made sense of new political mandates, and the power they had to influence policy in their classrooms. This chapter presents major themes that materialized from coding data from interviews of five teachers and one administrator. The themes that emerged include common sense, norms and expectations, accountability, compliance, and barriers.

This research sought an understanding of the conscious and unconscious decisions teachers made about policy in their day-to-day roles in the classroom. Traditional explorations of the successes or failures of policy implementation have rested on adherence to formal policies; this study challenged traditional systems of thinking about policy enactment and used teacher voice to better understand how teachers enforced or disrupted political mandates. A secondary goal was to explore how teachers went about sensemaking as a new policy, PBIS, was introduced. My expectation was that there would be well-defined resistance to implementing a top-down policy that has taken years to take hold at the research site, but as I listened to participant stories, I found much more nuance in teacher decision making.

The timing of this study was important because the teacher participants had experienced durable, steady leadership at the building level for all eight years of the PBIS rollout prior to their interviews. All but one participant taught at the research site for that entire window of time. At the time of the interviews, several participants were being introduced to a new unit principal, and all participants were learning their new head principal. Teachers had largely made sense of PBIS under previous leadership, but faced with changing guidance, now had to revisit how they accessed policy. This change in leadership forced all teachers to reconsider the role PBIS plays in their day-to-day classrooms and how they will respond as political actors. There is much we can learn about education policy if we pay closer attention to on-the-ground decisions by teachers, instead of relying solely on legislative clashes battled at the state house.

Limitations

This study was purposefully narrow in scope, choosing only to focus on a single school within a single school district. It does not explore other schools in the district, nor different types of districts in the state, and it only focused on teachers and administrators who were willing participants. This means that most of the stories shared focus on participants who were eager and confident enough to share their experiences. The study lacks participation and voices of participants who may have negative or openly defiant relationships with education policy at the research site. The sample size is small but allowed me to focus on what themes and patterns tied the participants together as they enacted the same mandate, under equivalent conditions. Despite its limitations, hopefully this study offers a glimpse into similar experiences of educators across the United States as teachers find themselves under rising pressure from legislators.

Conclusions and Themes in the Current Context

In my desire to investigate how teachers understood their own actions related to PBIS policy, there are several key themes that came to light through participant interviews—common sense, norms and expectations, accountability, compliance, and barriers. In Chapter Four, I shared authentic teacher voices, representative of new, veteran, and teacher leaders, highlighting these themes to provide glimpses into their stories and address my research question: *How do teachers make sense of and enact complex education policies, such as PBIS?* As discussed in Chapter One, the introduction, and Chapter Two, the literature review, working with teachers to understand the complexities of policy analysis and sensemaking in the tangled work of policy enactment rarely leads to any definitive answers. Duarte (2021) argued teachers choose to negotiate or reconfigure policies, which led to a lot of the interview discussions, where I tried to understand how teachers in a single building went about this work. Despite top-down, often neoliberal-aligned mandates introduced by federal, state, and local governments and school boards, teachers serve as the final line of political actors who determine if and to what degree policy is enacted. In the rest of this chapter, I aim to explore these themes while providing insight into my secondary goal of exploring *how* teachers went about constructing meaning of a new policy at the research site through the theoretical frameworks of CPA and sensemaking. In the sections below, I delve into the five key themes: common sense, norms and expectations, accountability, compliance, and barriers.

Common Sense

As I analyzed data collected from participant interviews, common sense was a prevailing theme. Common sense is at the heart of what guides many teacher decisions in their day-to-day practice. Thomas and Brady (2005) argued that policymakers lack a thorough understanding of the students for whom they are creating policies and the context in which they are implemented, leaving teachers to make common sense decisions about how to enact educational mandates. Mitra (2022) reinforced this concept of common sense policy construction by teachers, noting that policy is not just about legislation as it is formally written, but what happens when frontline political actors, namely teachers, implement it at the ground level. The teachers in this study did not have time, nor resources, to deconstruct convoluted legislation as passed by the State and instead relied on a common sense approach to select parts of the legislation that felt most applicable to students and their classrooms. This is almost certainly not how policymakers conceptualized implementation of legislation such as HB 318, but teachers trusted their common sense to make their decisions.

What teachers in this study may not have realized is that, even when approaching policy with common sense, they were making decisions that resisted or executed policy-generated routines (Brewer, 2014; Stein, 2004). Policy implementation, Stein (2004) notes, is sometimes used interchangeably with policy compliance and is a complex approach to policy enactment because teachers may believe they are acting in compliance with a mandate while sharing little, if any, of the same understanding of said mandate as the site administration or policy legislators. Teachers in this study approached PBIS by choosing pieces of the policy that worked in their classrooms—the creation of the matrix and treating kids with kindness—without discussing if this was in alignment with the intentions of the administration. None of the participants discussed the connection between implementing the components of PBIS that they felt were positive for students and the rise of the neoliberal agenda. Several participants brought up data and the increased emphasis on outcomes in our interviews but felt these ideas were extensions of common sense practices with PBIS (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013). Thomas, the administrator in this study, felt data collection was a strength of PBIS, as did some teacher participants. Using student behavior data to demonstrate effectiveness and guide changes at the building level was viewed as an extension of the common sense practices teachers shared (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Applying CPA to understand data collection in PBIS, it would be impossible to discuss

the benefits teachers and administrators named without also mentioning the use of data to monitor behavior and a need to control populations, encouraging complicity and accountability to create compliant students (Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012).

Common sense is a guiding principle for many teachers, and the teachers in this study were confident in trusting their own common sense to make decisions that were best for students. The application of common sense drove teacher decisions, the reliance upon which only increased with teacher experience. Teachers in this study who were mid-career or later have seen a number of mandates throughout their careers and are practiced at fine tuning their approaches to enacting policy—they welcomed the parts of PBIS that made the most sense and applied them to their classroom practices. They ignored or denied the parts of the policy that did not align with previous experiences or prior knowledge or that simply did not make sense for their students.

Norms and Expectations

Norms and expectations become the shared beliefs that create school culture or climate (März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Sugai et al., 2016). Many of the practices that shape the values of school cultures are rooted in neoliberal ideas that regulate public schooling or coach students on the middle-class expectations for behavior (Bornstein, 2017; Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) emphasized that data collection to monitor behavior of the collective school is an attempt to control the entire school population and encourage complicity and accountability, leading to the establishment of the norms and expectations within the school. Under PBIS, local sites have autonomy to determine expectations and honor local cultures, but Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) argued that the resulting expectations are almost always uniform, resulting in a collective government across all schools aimed at appropriate behaviors, specifically positive social behaviors, which many participants in this study touted as a strength of PBIS. For example, Participant 2, Avery, expressed that, when positive behavior is present, common, and repeated in a school with PBIS expectations, those behaviors become the norms of the school. Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) argued that neoliberal control of positive social behaviors is what creates school-wide norms and expectations, where all individuals are expected to comply in a range of settings in the school. At the research site, control of these norms was, to a great extent, shaped by the creation and display of the matrix. Originally matrices were created by the administration and leadership team, later by content-level teams,

and currently by individual teachers, but the purpose remains the same—visibly communicated expectations about school-wide behavior norms.

How norms and expectations are reinforced remains a source of contention in the implementation of PBIS at the research site. Participant 5, Sam, who is also a parent in the district, discussed how affirming the use of rewards are for his elementary-aged girls. He explained that, while his daughters are motivated to follow rules regardless, they react favorably to extra incentives to make good choices. Other participants, including Participant 2, Avery, questioned what message it sends to students if one group is continually rewarded for achieving desirable behaviors and another is not. At the research site, students are given tickets for positive, expected behaviors, which can be entered into a raffle for gift cards. This neoliberal marketization of individual behaviors commodifies expected social norms in the school and contributes to what Robbins and Kovalchuk (2012) consider a sense of consumerism in the PBIS framework, where tokens or prizes are exchanged for normalized, expected, school-wide behaviors. Marketization of desired behaviors calls into question whether PBIS is encouraging authentic changes in behavior for the betterment of the school or, as participants speculated, if students are driven by an extrinsic reward system.

Borstein (2015) argued that PBIS and the encouragement of regulated behaviors by policymakers are attempts at regulating students through power. Using formal positions of power within the structure of schooling to enact policy is what März and Kelchtermans (2013) referred to as micropolitics. Micropolitics challenge teachers, those in the study included, to make a decision between what is right and good for students versus decisions about supporting or resisting mandated policies (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). The teachers in this study all felt they were choosing what was best for their students, even if that meant "accidentally" complying with a mandate. None of the teachers expressed that the decisions they made were purely driven by policy; they simply believed encouraging norms and expectations where students are kind and have a sense of belonging and a network of peers and adults who care for them was a good thing, regardless of any policy attached to it. Participants were driven by the belief and purpose that setting standards and finding ways for all students to meet those standards, even if it was as simple as being kind, was key to establishing positive norms and expectations.

Bornstein (2017) wrote about the use of student discipline codes structured around PBIS, which task students with performing in responsible ways that are conducive to learning,

encouraging not just individual responsibility for behavior, but also responsibility for the common good—another norm in schooling. "Good behavior" expectations become an additional norm in these situations, where students are expected to comply with norms and expectations, both in the classroom and in the community (Bornstein, 2017). School districts are more likely to define behavior expectations in positively framed "what to do" statements but stay silent on defining expectations around collaboration and curiosity that could enhance learning environments (Bornstein, 2017).

Accountability

Accountability, for many in education, has a negative ring to it. Accountability in public schooling means prescriptive practices with measurable outcomes, data on student performance collected through standardized tests, deprofessionalization of teachers, and a loss of local control (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013; Duarte, 2021). These measures merged to become what Ellison et al. (2018) defined as the neoliberal paradigm—a set of emerging policies aimed at accountability. Many teachers find discomfort in demands driven by accountability practices, such as data collection about student performance and behavior (Duarte & Brewer, 2019). Participant 1, Jennifer, did not completely throw out the value of data in education, but worried that, with so many other factors at play in the classroom, data might overshadow making decisions and changes that are good for kids. With existing research that examines the lack of teacher agency in accountability-based practices (e.g., Biesta et al., 2015; Datnow, 2020; Datnow & Park, 2012; Robinson, 2012), I was curious about the conscious and unconscious decisions teachers made about accountability policies in their classrooms. Participant 5, Sam, presented his decisions about PBIS as accidental compliance and coincidental support of accountability practices. Like other participants in the study, Sam was compliant, not because it was expected of him, but because some of the common sense approaches associated with PBIS simply seemed like a good idea. Not intentionally "doing PBIS" *is* a political decision of sorts—by actively choosing *not* to go against a policy, teachers are choosing to enact policies that guide classroom decisions and interactions with students.

Accountability came up in all participant interviews, but how teachers defined it varied considerably. Some defined it as the data and information ODE requires of districts, others considered it to be information collected at the building level about student behavior and

academics, and others still considered it to be part of the expectations teachers have for students. Accountability was a readily identifiable theme in the study, but a lack of coherence as to what that actually meant led to ambiguity about how we discussed it. Who and what is governed under accountability measures defined by PBIS remains up for debate. In his research, Bornstein (2017) referenced office discipline referrals as the most prominent use of data in PBIS. Many educators are familiar with overarching federal educational mandates like NCLB and ESSA, but when asked directly about educational policy, participants in this study were less certain about explicit policy knowledge and accountability measures related to PBIS. Under ESSA, which went into effect during the 2017–2018 school year, many states began to use PBIS as a non-academic indicator for district accountability. When asked, teachers in this study rightly hypothesized that Ohio legislators envisioned some sort of requirement, that the research site chose PBIS, and that other states were following the same mandate. Participant 5, Sam, was on the leadership committee during the early days of the rollout, when the leadership team was discouraged from even using the word mandate, which may have been an attempt by the district to discourage the association of PBIS with prescribed directives, affecting implementation.

Ellison et al. (2018) argued that teachers are a missing voice in the policy debate, where they are tasked with additional demands without necessary resources, further diminishing their roles as policy actors. The teachers interviewed in this study were expected to interact with PBIS and contribute to the reproduction of social practices, without time and space to process their own sensemaking about driving accountability measures within the school (Carpenter & Brewer, 2014). School climate indicators under ESSA still require accountability measures such as data comparison of student subgroups, while participants in the study viewed data as a way to make better informed choices for students (Sugai et al., 2016). Some participants in the study celebrated accountability through data collection, noting that it allowed administrators to make real decisions based on real data, even proposing making data available to students as well. Other teacher participants never mentioned data or accountability anywhere in their interviews, minimizing the role of accountability in local policy enactment. Spillane et al. (2002) weighed in on the accountability discussion, pointing out that teachers often encounter accountability mechanisms through evolving understandings, which happened at the research site. Thomas, the administrator participant in the study, explained that, despite introducing PBIS years earlier to the school, it was not until the ‘21–’22 school year that the building focused on using a software

program to make data collection easy and accessible. This suggests that early in building-wide PBIS implementation data were primarily collected to satisfy mandates and not for its potential benefits to staff and students.

Every participant in the study mentioned the classroom matrices as the most important metric for teacher implementation. I will discuss this more in depth in the section about compliance, but it is important to note that all teacher participants saw this as a way they could be compliant and hold students accountable for behaviors in the classroom—yet another form of accountability under PBIS. It was one of the few themes that was consistent across all interviews. The extensive use of the classroom matrix standardized and sterilized teachers' attempts at sensemaking, whereby teachers were presented with branded templates and pre-selected professional development materials, which had already been affected by the district leadership's understanding of external demands and pressures (Spillane et al., 2002). This (pre)translation tactic meant that documents produced at the local level, such as the matrix, became a crucial tool for teachers to understand and enact policy, which Ball et al. (2011) associate with standardization and deprofessionalization of teachers. Maguire et al. (2010) suggested that holding teachers accountable for enacting multiple, unaligned policies encourage them to become ambivalent in the policy arena, while Ball et al. (2011) suggested this "regime of accountability" (p. 634) even more greatly impacts new teachers who are reliant on building leadership to guide them through accountability practices.

Compliance

No participant in the study outright discussed compliance as a driving force behind PBIS at the research site, so I encouraged them to discuss their views about what PBIS looks like when implemented with fidelity. This was where the classroom matrix became a key topic that all teacher participants discussed. Over the course of the interviews with teachers, producing and displaying a classroom matrix that explicitly stated the classroom expectations under the keywords safe, responsible, respectful, and kind, was the gateway to compliance. All of the participants in the study reported compliance with this part of the district mandate. For some participants, like Avery, this was the definition of compliance and the way she, as a newer teacher, was able to concretely and outwardly demonstrate her commitment to the mandate. In their research, Ball et al. (2011) acknowledged that junior teachers like Avery are largely

receivers of policy, where enactment is more about the day-to-day matters in the classroom and less about the big picture. Junior teachers may be shielded by more senior staff, may be quicker to trust decisions made by leadership, and because of the focus on day-to-day operations, policy becomes something that is accepted by the profession and not something that has room for interpretation (Ball et al., 2011). This was evident when Avery shared that she trusts administrators to select behavior management strategies that are best for kids, elaborating that she would trust any of the current philosophies implemented in the district.

Participant 5, Sam, is a more veteran teacher than Avery, but he too viewed the matrix as a main method of compliance. The matrix is visible, expected annually, and has clear expectations for the role of the teacher in its creation. This is an anomaly among many education mandates that leave educators struggling to make sense of how, and why, to rearrange their curriculum to make space for the latest buzzword. Even more rare is the chance for teachers to have their role so plainly defined. The matrix template is shared with teachers, takes a one-time focus to produce, and then lives a static existence until it is revisited the following year. It takes minimal effort and investment from teachers while maintaining its place in local policy construction. With such an accessible item at the heart of local compliance, PBIS as an educational policy is easily encouraged, establishing rules and regulations for the building (Datnow & Park, 2012).

While the teachers in this study were compliant with the matrix, actions beyond the matrix varied. Some participants felt compliance in the building should lead towards a true shift in culture versus the inorganic use of reward systems; some felt compliance should lead to authenticity and regularity within the PBIS framework. For others, compliance meant jumping through hoops and the use of buzzwords as they grappled with how to make sense of policy without advance notice to learn the program before being asked to implement it. Still other teachers hoped compliance happened naturally through a range of decisions focused on good teaching. From a district standpoint, compliance was encouraged through professional development that left teachers, as one participant defined it, as consumers of a product created by the district. Ultimately, policy compliance was largely self-defined as opposed to managed from the top-down, as evidenced by the inability of participants to articulate a clear vision of what district expectations were when it came to PBIS implementation. The inability of participants to define compliance further shaped PBIS policy at the local level as teachers believed they *were*

following the policy, while not necessarily sharing the same understanding as district leadership or state and federal policymakers who designed the policy (Stein, 2004). It seemed it was taken for granted at the building level that a collective understanding of PBIS policy existed within the school setting, despite alterations to the policy through teachers' own sensemaking (Stein, 2004).

Barriers

I expected some frustration from participants, which would lead to barriers with implementation of PBIS at the research site. As Ellison et al. (2018) stated, teachers are often missing voices in the policy debate, and I assumed local implementation of PBIS would be no different. Some teachers in this study, like Sam and Jennifer, were engaged early in the policy construction process at the local level while others, like Avery, arrived late in the process and simply received the policy, resulting in divergent experiences with policy construction. CPA explores how individuals react to such institutional forces, and in this case, I was curious how teachers would react to the institutional barriers in place, including lack of time and clarity about PBIS as policy. Policymaking is inherently social, and the different ways in which teachers were engaged as they performed their roles in the school resulted in different feelings about barriers to implementation (Brewer, 2014). Those who were included in the expanding sphere of policy creation at the building and district level acknowledged a process whereby their relationship with PBIS evolved—they did not always accept the policy as it was, but they were able to overcome personal and institutional barriers to implementation, eventually arriving at a place where they generally felt positive about PBIS. Others who were less formally engaged by top-down leadership focused more on what they were missing in resources or training in order to meet the imposed demands of PBIS (Ellison et al., 2018). As Duarte (2021) stated, the lived experiences of these teachers undoubtedly changed PBIS as teachers employed their own creativity about how to approach policy.

Teachers in this study accepted and dealt with, but did not seem to challenge, the barriers that existed. Brown (2015) hypothesized that teachers who challenge the status quo through institutional resistance risk impacting how administrators view their effectiveness and, therefore, their performance when they attempt to counter policies. Critical policy analysts would consider how such barriers complicate knowledge and establish resistance to the ways in which more voices, including teachers, are inserted into the policy process (Brewer, 2014). The complex and

varied reactions to barriers teachers faced in policy enactment at the local level is in line with what Maguire et al. (2010) termed a negotiated process, where political actors respond to the factors at play. This nonlinear implementation approach to policy enactment varies greatly between individuals and is often missing from the classroom setting, where individual teachers' approaches may not always conform to the formal policy (Maguire et al., 2010).

One barrier to policy enactment that many participants cited was confusion. Confusion among some participants may be attributed to what Diem et al. (2014) contrasted as policy rhetoric versus practiced reality or policy development versus policy implementation. The divide between rhetoric and reality refocused sensemaking as an integral piece of the policy enactment process as an even greater emphasis was placed on teachers taking pre-existing knowledge and altering and building on it in some way (Mitra, 2022). When teachers moved beyond generic interpretation of policy and focused on enactment in their classrooms, based on their own experiences, their understandings and decisions became as much about what they do as about what they do *not* do to ignore, adapt, or adopt policy (Spillane et al., 2002). Teacher decisions are further complicated and blurred by barriers such as administrator control of funding, materials, and requirements when they choose how teachers will be introduced to a policy (Spillane et al., 2002). How administrators choose to present new mandates to staff can standardize the sensemaking process for teachers through the external influence of the administrator's own external demands and pressures (Spillane et al., 2002).

A lack of clear information about PBIS, including its purpose, justification for local implementation decisions, and an end goal for the district, was another barrier participants cited. Education reform is not neutral and requires educators to construct multiple meanings out of a single policy while also engaging in collective sensemaking to shape assumptions, norms, and values into the accepted school culture (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). Teacher participants discussed the evolution of collective sensemaking as they worked at a building level, a departmental level, and an individual level to understand why PBIS implementation mattered, how local decisions were made, who was responsible for local decisions, and to define an end goal to signal success within the framework. A lack of information at these stages shaped how teachers went about meaning making and, in many cases, impeded progress towards successful implementation. Practical knowledge, or a lack thereof, including time for collaboration, purposeful policy introduction, and engagement of teachers in decision making, impacted how

teachers negotiated meaning and addressed incoherence in policy construction (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Mitra, 2022). Leithwood et al. (2004) pointed out that, when sensemaking, teachers may encounter barriers that result in resistance to change or a lack of compliance; administrators and educational leaders should remember that these are natural reactions to barriers and may not be calculated attempts to undermine policy as much as they are natural reactions to the demands a required by a new mandate.

Future Research and Concluding Thoughts

As I reviewed data collected in this study, I was excited about the insight teachers were able to provide about policy enactment at the local level and the possibilities it opens for future inclusion of teachers in the policy arena. All the teachers who participated in this study had something to add to the conversation, whether or not they had been formally engaged in the PBIS rollout at the research site. By sharing their stories, I hope this study helps to recenter teacher voices in the fight for control over educational decisions, shifting it away from state and federal lawmakers and back to local control, down to a classroom level, allowing teachers to exercise their own creativity in policy enactment (Duarte, 2021; Ellison et al., 2018).

Future Research & Implications

Qualitative data collected through interviews for this study may be enhanced by the use of focus groups to further examine how teachers use sensemaking and collective knowledge to define their roles as political actors. A focus group would generate a rich amount of data in a shorter time frame than would be possible with observations or individual interviews (Hatch, 2002). By creating opportunities for conversations *between* and *among* teachers about their shared experiences as policy interpreters and implementers, education policy could be explored in-depth at the local level to understand teacher enactment and belief around policy (Hatch, 2002; März & Kelchtermans, 2013). In a focus group, meaning would be negotiated as the conversation unfolds and participants could build collective narratives by adding to what others in the group are stating, though this presents the risk of group members aligning themselves with others to maintain social coherence, rather than maintaining individuality (Hydén & Bülow, 2003).

Another opportunity to consider is how schools focus on local decision making in PBIS. Many scholars are beginning to challenge the one-size-fits-all approach that often results when PBIS is implemented school-wide (Bal et al., 2012; Bornstein, 2017; Fallon et al., 2012; Sugai et al., 2011). In his research, Bornstein (2017) stressed the need for a balance in PBIS data analysis where schools document student strengths as thoroughly as they document their deficiencies. In addition, Bornstein (2017) proposes disaggregating discipline referrals by staff to examine issues like sexism, classism, and racism, to better understand the culture and climate within a school and to encourage a democratic sharing of power, focused on balanced and culturally responsive data analysis. A more culturally responsive approach to data analysis would bring with it the opportunity for schools to capitalize on locally defining specific expectations and methods for teaching those expectations that are relevant to the culture of students (Bornstein, 2017; Horner & Sugai, 2015). As part of this more culturally responsive approach to PBIS, teachers and other stakeholders could be engaged as part of the democratic process to define locally relevant behavioral expectations as well as suitable sources of data to support expectations, instead of defaulting to the expected disciplinary data (Bornstein, 2017). Locally and democratically determined definitions for behavior, data, and responses would deconstruct the previously accepted status quo of PBIS (Bornstein, 2017; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Lastly, ongoing research similar to this study but that includes student voice would allow both staff and researchers to explore real world implications of PBIS for students. Many of the participants in this study had students and benefits to students at the forefront of their purpose with PBIS, but no participants mentioned engaging students in authentic conversations to understand if the school was meeting the needs, expectations, and desires of students in the district, other than a once-a-year student climate survey. Enlisting student voices through qualitative interviews to gain additional insight into PBIS implementation would help fill a gap I perceive in how students interact with policy designed specifically to govern their schooling experiences.

Concluding Thoughts

Educational policy is only going to continue to shape the personal and professional lives of teachers and the students with whom they share their classrooms every day. Taking time and energy to honestly engage those whom policy impacts the most must become the norm for

district leadership and lawmakers alike. Teachers are tasked with increasing demands throughout the school day, including the pressure to interpret and enact federal, state, and local education policies, which they have little to no say in constructing. This study aimed to explore how teachers handled the pressure of enacting a single policy to better understand how teachers advance or impede education policy generated by top-down political structures. Educational policy continues to be one of the greatest guiding forces in both culture and curriculum in classrooms across the United States, and often these policies have been shaped by prescriptive education reforms (Datnow & Park, 2012). This forces teachers to make decisions about whether to implement policy in a manner that is meaningful or in a manner that is obedient—the latter of which deprofessionalizes teachers (Datnow & Park, 2012; Duarte, 2021; Ellison et al., 2018). Teachers can take steps to assert themselves in the policy sphere and to ensure building and district leadership hears their voices.

There is an urgent need for legislators and educational leaders alike to recenter the voices of teachers as they design policy that governs classroom practices. Teachers are faced with ever increasing and unnecessary challenges through neoliberal policies that seek to increase accountability, but with valid, credible input from educators at the policy creation stage, policy can be reshaped before it reaches classrooms. We must support the inclusion of teacher voices as a regular expectation in the policymaking process. I hope this study inspires teachers to embrace their roles as policy enactors and to recognize and exercise the agency they possess as the final step before educational policy reaches students.

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APPENDIX A: FORMAL TEACHER STUDY INVITATION AND CONSENT

Research Consent Information: PBIS and Local Teacher Decisions

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Meghan Fay from Miami University. The purpose of this research is to better understand how teachers interact with education policy at the local level, specifically experiences with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), through a semi-structured interview. Participation in this research is restricted to persons 18 years of age or older who have at least one year of teaching experience and one year experience implementing PBIS-based practices.

The interview should take about 60 minutes. Your participation is voluntary, and you may decline to participate in any part of the discussion or withdraw from the interview or project at any time. Foreseeable risks and/or discomforts associated with this study are potential disagreements with coworkers regarding a building-wide educational policy. The benefit of this study is to better understand how colleagues navigate classroom decisions to best support students.

Notes accompanying this discussion will not include information about your identity. Consent forms and interview notes will be stored separately in locked cabinets accessible only to the research team. Only the research team will have access to individual responses. Consent forms and interview notes will be retained until December 1, 2025.

With your permission, I will digitally record this discussion to ensure accuracy. Later, I will take notes based on the recording and delete the recording. If you inadvertently include identifying information, such information will be removed from any stored data.

Funding agencies or journal policies may require that individual participant data be made available to other researchers. Sharing data in this way advances the field by allowing the data to be used beyond this study. No personally identifying information (names or identifying demographics), will be included in the shared data. Care will always be taken to ensure data that is shared outside the Miami research team would not include identification unless the subject has explicitly agreed to this. You may participate in this research without consenting to the data being shared.

☐ My data may be shared.

☐ My data may not be shared.

This study (04598e) has been reviewed and approved by the Miami University Research Ethics & Integrity Program. If you have any questions about this research or feel you need more information to determine whether you would like to volunteer, you can contact me at dillonme@miamioh.edu or faculty advisory Dr. Joel Malin at malinjr@miamioh.edu. If you have questions or concerns about the rights of research subjects, you may contact our reviewing body: Research Ethics and Integrity Office at Miami University at (513) 529-3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu.

Please keep a copy of this information for future reference.

Yours,

Meghan Fay

Participant Name: _____
Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____
Email address if you would like a summary of the results: _____

APPENDIX B: TEACHER INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION AND QUESTIONS

PBIS and Local Teacher Decisions Interview

Demographics and Questions

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews will be used to gain further insight into how individual teachers explain their experiences with PBIS. All participants have at least one year of teaching experience and one year experience implementing PBIS-based practices. This activity should take about 60 minutes.

I will digitally record this discussion to ensure accuracy. Later, I will take notes based on the recording and delete the recording. If you inadvertently include identifying information, such information will be removed from any stored data.

1. Please introduce yourself, years of experience, and content area.
2. How did you feel about PBIS when you were first introduced to it?
3. How did you go about wrapping your head around PBIS at our school?
4. How did you prepare to implement PBIS?
5. What is PBIS to you?
6. What is it NOT?
7. How do you feel about PBIS?
8. Describe what PBIS looks like in your classroom.
9. What is your understanding of PBIS as an education policy?
10. How do you share your PBIS-related expectations with students? Families?
11. What does PBIS look like when implemented with fidelity?
12. Will you briefly summarize your perspective about implementing PBIS at the high school level?
13. What would you change about PBIS implementation?

APPENDIX C: FORMAL ADMINISTRATOR INVITATION AND CONSENT

Research Consent Information: PBIS and Local Teacher Decisions
Administrative Consent

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Meghan Fay from Miami University. The purpose of this research is to better understand how administrators interact with education policy at the local level, specifically experiences with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), through an interview. Participation in this research is restricted to persons 18 years of age or older who have at least one year of experience overseeing and implementing PBIS-based practices.

The interview should each take about 60 minutes. Your participation is voluntary, and you may decline to participate in any part or withdraw from the interview or project at any time. Foreseeable risks and/or discomforts associated with this study are potential disagreements with coworkers regarding a building-wide educational policy. The benefit of this study is to better understand how educators navigate classroom decisions to best support students.

Notes accompanying this interview will not include information about your identity. Consent forms and interview notes will be stored separately in locked cabinets accessible only to the research team. Only the research team will have access to interview responses. Consent forms and interview notes will be retained until December 1, 2025.

With your permission, I will digitally record this discussion to ensure accuracy. Later, I will take notes based on the recording and delete the recording. If you inadvertently include identifying information, such information will be removed from any stored data.

Funding agencies or journal policies may require that individual participant data be made available to other researchers. Sharing data in this way advances the field by allowing the data to be used beyond this study. No personally identifying information (names or identifying demographics), will be included in the shared data. Care will always be taken to ensure data that is shared outside the Miami research team would not include identification unless the subject has explicitly agreed to this. You may participate in this research without consenting to the data being shared.

☐ My data may be shared.

☐ My data may not be shared.

Results of the research will be presented publicly only as aggregate summaries.

This study (04598e) has been reviewed and approved by the Miami University Research Ethics & Integrity Program. If you have any questions about this research or you feel you need more information to determine whether you would like to volunteer, you can contact me at dillonme@miamioh.edu or faculty advisory Dr. Joel Malin at malinjr@miamioh.edu. If you have questions or concerns about the rights of research subjects, you may contact our reviewing body: Research Ethics and Integrity Office at Miami University at (513) 529-3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu.

Please keep a copy of this information for future reference.

Yours,

Meghan Fay

Participant Name: _____
Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____
Email address if you would like a summary of the results: _____

APPENDIX D: ADMINISTRATOR EMAIL CONFIRMATION AND QUESTIONS

PBIS Administrator Interview

The purpose of this research is to better understand how administrators interact with education policy at the local level, specifically experiences with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), through an interview. All participants have at least one year of experience overseeing and implementing PBIS-based practices at the building level. This interview should take about 60 minutes.

I will digitally record this discussion to ensure accuracy. Later, I will take notes based on the recording and delete the recording. If you inadvertently include identifying information, such information will be removed from any stored data.

1. Please introduce yourself, years of experience, and current professional title.
2. How did you first hear about PBIS?
3. Why do you support PBIS?
4. How did you feel about PBIS when you were first introduced to it?
5. How did you go about wrapping your head around PBIS at our school?
6. How did you prepare to implement PBIS?
7. What is PBIS to you?
8. What is it NOT?
9. How do you feel about PBIS?
10. Describe what PBIS looked like in our building.
11. What is your understanding of PBIS as an education policy?
12. How did you share your PBIS-related expectations with staff? Families?
13. What does PBIS look like when implemented with fidelity?
14. Will you briefly summarize your perspective about implementing PBIS at the high school level?
15. What struggles did you face implementing PBIS at the high school level?
16. What would you change about PBIS implementation?

APPENDIX E: RESEARCH APPROVAL FROM SUPERINTENDENT

Hello,

I am very excited about your research project. You have my permission to move forward with your research. I communicated with both Carrie Hennessy and Karyn Denslow and we are all supportive of your project. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns and if I can be of further assistance. It will be beneficial when you have completed your research to share with us what you learned and how this might help us in meeting our goals.

Best Wishes!

Sincerely,

Mindy McCarty-Stewart
Superintendent of Kettering City Schools
Phone: 937.499.1430 | Fax: 937.499.1465
500 Lincoln Park Blvd., Kettering, Ohio 45429
ketteringschools.org
Mailing Address: 580 Lincoln Park Blvd., Suite 105

APPENDIX F: RESEARCH APPROVAL FROM INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 10, 2023

To: Meghan Fay and Dr. Lucian Szlizewski

Re: Educational Policy Document Analysis, Focus Group, and Interviews

Project reference number is: 04598e
(Please refer to this ID number in all correspondence to compliance administration)

The project noted above and as described in your application for registering Human Subjects (HS) research has been screened to determine if it is regulated research or meets the criteria of one of the categories of research that can be exempt from approval of an Institutional Review Board (per 45 CFR 46). The determination for your research is indicated below.

The research described in the application is regulated human subjects research, however, the description meets the criteria of at least one exempt category included in 45 CFR 46 and associated guidance.

The Applicable Exempt Category(ies) is/are: 2.

As part of the exemption process, your procedures were reviewed for and found to be in adherence to the principles for the ethical conduct of research as described in the Belmont Report and Declaration of Helsinki.

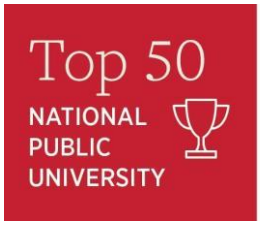
Research may proceed upon receipt of this certification and compliance with any conditions listed above. When research is deemed exempt from IRB review, it is the responsibility of the researcher listed above to ensure that all future persons not listed in the application who i) will aid in collecting data or, ii) will have access to data with subject identifying information, meet the training requirements (CITI Online Training).

If you are considering any changes in this research that may alter the level of risk or wish to include a vulnerable population (e.g., subjects <18 years of age) that was not previously specified in the application, you must consult the Research Ethics and Integrity Program before implementing these changes.

Exemption certification is not transferable; this certificate only applies to the researcher(s) specified above. All research exempted from IRB review is subject to post-certification monitoring and audit by the Research Ethics and Integrity Program.

When referencing ethics oversight, you may indicate that the research plan was reviewed and approved by the Miami Research Ethics and Integrity Program. IRB approval should not be indicated.

Best of luck with your research,
Carla Myers, for the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research



Carla Myers

Coordinator of Scholarly Communications

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APPENDIX G: EXAMPLE TEACHER MATRIX