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# **Tensions and Opportunities: Early Career Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on Supplementing Curriculum With Teachers Pay Teachers**

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Supplemental teaching materials from online sources such as Teachers Pay Teachers proliferate the educational landscape. Understanding how teachers use these tools is key to improving teacher education. This paper reports on an exploratory qualitative study that captured the perspectives of six early career elementary teachers on the supplemental teaching materials available on Teachers Pay Teachers. Semistructured think-aloud interviews illuminate tensions related to teachers' landscapes of practice, institutional mistrust, perceived authoritativeness of sellers, curriculum marketplaces as altruistic platforms, and managing finite resources. Findings suggest that professionals who work with preservice and in-service elementary teachers must reframe their discussion of curriculum marketplaces toward developing teachers' critical curriculum cultivation practices. Such reframing has the potential to influence the ways educators at all levels make use of online curriculum marketplaces, what resources they download, and how those resources are employed.

Early career teachers are often new explorers of the landscape of classroom teaching. These teachers balance incredible amounts of competing needs and priorities, including developing effective lesson plans, while managing classroom dynamics and routines to support student learning. Many teachers turn to external resources, such as online curriculum marketplaces like Teachers Pay Teachers (TPT; <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/>), to supplement their school-provided curricula with unofficial materials.

Sites like TPT provide customers with an online shopping platform, where in theory, classroom teacher vendors can sell curricular materials directly to classroom teachers. A growing body of literature has critiqued the quality of resources on TPT and expressed concerns about teachers' ability to evaluate and select high-quality materials available there (e.g., Brown et al., 2023; Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017; McArthur Harris et al., 2021). Despite its well-documented shortcomings, teachers continue to flock to TPT to find supplementary materials that will better engage their students, support a range of learning needs, and save time (Sawyer & Myers, 2018; Sawyer, Dick, et al., 2020; Sawyer, Dredger, et al., 2020).

Limited scholarship has directly explored how teachers perceive and make use of the TPT platform and the curricular materials found there (Curcio et al., 2023). This dearth of research is particularly concerning for early career teachers, as evidence suggests that preservice and novice elementary teachers rely heavily on platforms like TPT for teaching inspiration (Sawyer & Myers, 2018).

Since the earliest emergence of online curriculum marketplaces (e.g., Pinterest), teacher educators have developed tools to support preservice teachers' use of such platforms (Gallagher et al., 2019; McArthur Harris et al., 2021). However, these tools or strategies for navigation and evaluation are rife with deficit assumptions about teachers' knowledge, their needs, and online curriculum marketplaces in general (Curcio et al., 2023). As a result, most early career teachers are challenged to navigate TPT with limited understanding of how the platform is positioned within their teacher education and school cultures, without significant teaching experience to guide their instructional decision-making, and without useful strategies for sifting through and evaluating the myriad resources available on the site (Beyer & Davis, 2012).

Responding to calls for further inquiry into teachers' perceptions of TPT and its resources (Curcio et al., 2023), this study explored tensions within the perspectives and reported practices of six early career elementary teachers regarding their use of TPT. In examining how six early career elementary teachers perceived, evaluated, and adopted curricular resources on TPT, this study identified multiple tensions that informed the teachers' decision-making regarding material supplementation. These findings offer implications regarding ways teacher educators can better prepare early career teachers to make use of online curricular spaces.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Challenges for Early Career Teachers**

Research reports indicate that new teachers face several challenges as they begin their careers. Student achievement tends to be worse in the classrooms of 1st-year teachers compared to teachers in their 2nd and 3rd years (Rivkin et al., 2005). Contributing factors include challenges related to classroom management, lesson planning, differentiation, assessment, time management, a lack of mentorship, and workload. Classroom management, or strategies that reduce interpersonal conflicts and disruptions during teaching time, is positively correlated with cognitive student outcomes (Kunter et al., 2013). Yet many new teachers struggle with maintaining control and managing behavior in the classroom. They report finding it challenging to establish clear expectations and routines that help students stay on task and engaged in learning (Hoy & Weinstein, 2006).

Developing effective lesson plans that meet the needs of diverse learners can be a daunting task for new teachers, as well. A lack of resources for lesson and unit planning impedes teachers' ability to actualize their conceptual goals (Martell, 2022; Mathews, 2011). Further, differentiating their instruction to a whole classroom of needs and personalities can be confounding, and teachers often feel ill-equipped for the work (Melnick & Meister, 2008). As a result, new teachers frequently spend more time than experienced teachers developing engaging and effective lesson plans.

Additionally, given the complexity of the work, teachers must always be working toward multiple instructional goals simultaneously. Striking a balance between various goals can be challenging, and it often takes teachers a couple of years to figure out how to avoid prioritizing some of goals at the expense of others (Voet & De Wever, 2020).

Because of these and other challenges, new teachers require support and guidance to navigate their profession effectively. They cite a lack of meaningful support and feedback from experienced colleagues and administrators as a major contributor to burnout (Fry, 2007; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). In general, the workload for new teachers can be overwhelming, especially in their first few years. New teachers often find it challenging to balance the demands of teaching with other responsibilities, such as lesson planning, grading, and professional development (Toropova et al., 2019). They also feel pressure to perform at a high level while managing the demands of their personal life (Morris et al., 2017; Ozder, 2011).

### **Curriculum Marketplaces**

In response to what often feels like a sink-or-swim environment, many teachers turn to virtual resource pools — social media sites and online marketplaces that host curriculum resources — to supplement their officially adopted curriculum materials with unofficial materials (Hunter & Hall, 2018). Rather than offerings from traditional curriculum developers, these sites function as crowdsourcing platforms, promoting

materials uploaded by other practicing educators that can be downloaded for a minimal fee (Silver, 2022).

In particular, TPT has emerged as the most popular online educational marketplace of the current decade (Hodge et al., 2019). Through TPT, educators can post and sell digital lesson plans, class activities, student materials, and other original ideas. It has cumulated more than 7 million users since it was founded in 2006, among which approximately 85% are preK-12 teachers based in the United States (Brown et al., 2023). In fact, with such a large base of educational resources at affordable prices, scholars argue that in many ways TPT functions as a community of practice, where teachers go seeking resources and advice (Opfer et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2021; Torphy et al., 2020).

This claim warrants further interrogation as some scholars have raised concerns about the negative impact of consumerist ideology on education (Rodríguez et al., 2020; Schroeder et al., 2023). Notably, Brown et al. (2023) observed that TPT seller sites market themselves as “one-stop shops” (p. 1) in an attempt to capture users’ exclusive attention, thus discouraging legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and resource sharing.

While teachers’ use of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook has been widely researched (e.g., Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Rehm & Notten, 2016), the way in which curriculum marketplaces support professional learning and classroom curriculum design is still an emerging area of inquiry in educational research (Curcio et al., 2023). Limited empirical studies have investigated teachers’ use of TPT or the quality of the curricula available on TPT (Shelton et al., 2020; Curcio et al., 2023).

Inferences can be drawn from research on other curriculum marketplaces, such as Pinterest. For example, surveys of Pinterest resources found that many lessons contain inaccuracies (Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017), contain stereotypical and racist content (Rodríguez et al., 2020), and consist primarily of low-level cognitive tasks (Sawyer et al., 2019).

Research focused specifically on TPT has observed that high-volume sellers perceive the materials they post to be user friendly, affordable, and high-quality (Sawyer, Dick, et al., 2020), but scholars note their lack of instructional support, diverse representation, differentiation, and higher order thinking (Brown et al., 2023; McArthur Harris et al., 2021). The intended user is “effectively, divorced from an instructional context because assigning context would limit the potential market for the material” (Brown et al., 2023, p. 9). Materials on TPT also frequently violate copyright law (McArthur Harris et al., 2021).

### **Teacher Perspectives on Teachers Pay Teachers**

In general, the way novice teachers think about and engage in curriculum design is not widely understood (Beyer & Davis, 2012). A teacher’s perception about the utility of a resource impacts how they use it (Beyer & Davis, 2012), and research suggests that many new teachers remain uncritical of curricular resources, trusting their authority (Schroeder &

Curcio, 2022). This issue underscores the importance of capturing teachers' perceptions of curricular resources on sites like TPT, because despite its myriad shortcomings teachers and teacher candidates use TPT frequently.

Sawyer, Dredger, et al. (2020) found that elementary education preservice teachers relied on TPT and other platforms for lesson planning nearly as often as they sought guidance from their university instructors or host teachers and much more often than they used resources from professional organizations (Caniglia & Meadows, 2018). This finding mirrors data from in-service teachers, of which up to 77% reported using TPT for curriculum planning (Kaufman et al., 2016).

Research also indicates that users believe TPT resources to be generally of high quality and, particularly, feel that the resources they pay for are high quality (Carpenter & Shelton, 2021). Thus, users may not recognize that materials posted to TPT undergo no peer review or vetting process (Hunter & Hall, 2018) and may not have a framework for delineating between low- and high-quality instructional resources (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). This situation is especially concerning for novice teachers, who are navigating the additional early career challenges described in the section above.

Both the materials available on TPT and the ways teachers use these materials to support their practice warrant further study (Xu et al., 2022). Understanding early career teachers' motivations and perspectives related to curricular supplementation via curriculum marketplaces such as TPT can help professionals who work with preservice and in-service teachers refine how these teachers find, evaluate, and use curricular resources on TPT. The study described here was motivated by these concerns. As two teacher educators, we believe in teacher professionalism and the capacity for early career teachers to become critical cultivators of online curriculum (e.g., Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). Efforts to support teachers in developing these practices began with an exploratory study of early career elementary teachers' perceptions and reported practices.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study asked the following question: What tensions do early career elementary teachers identify when using Teachers Pay Teachers and evaluating materials found on Teachers Pay Teachers? To explore this question, an exploratory qualitative study was designed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) involving 1-hour, semistructured, think-aloud interviews.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited via a listserv email to students enrolled in an education master's degree program at a regional university in the northeastern United States. The protocol for this study was reviewed and approved by the same university. Interested participants who met our definition of early career (no more than 5 years of teaching experience) were invited to sign up for the study by completing an online demographic survey that captured their teaching experience, instructional grade level, and frequency of TPT use. Six participants were selected to maximize variation within frequency of TPT use (see Table 1). Written informed

consent was obtained from each participant for their anonymized information to be published in this article.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Information*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>	<b>Frequency of TPT Use</b>	<b>Instructional Level</b>
Angelica	1st year teaching	At least 1x per week	1st grade
Christina	1st year teaching	At least 1x per week	K - 4th grade
Erin	1st year teaching	At least 1x per week	K - 4th grade
Mackenzie	3rd year teaching	At least 1x per month	2nd - 4th grade
Beatriz	1st year teaching	At least 1x per week	Pre-K - 5th grade
Taylor	2nd year teaching	At least 1x per month	5th grade

### Data Collection

Think-aloud interviews were conducted over the Zoom videoconferencing platform in fall 2022. The first part of the interview focused on capturing participants' views on and experiences with the TPT platform. Questions included the following:

- “What do you think about Teachers Pay Teachers?”
- “What reputation does Teachers Pay Teachers have amongst the teachers you know?”
- “What might you use Teachers Pay Teachers to find, if anything?”
- “What are you teaching now?”

These questions were used to spark general conversation on the role TPT plays in participant's conception of their regular classroom experience. While the early part of the interview addressed these questions specifically, participants often interwove their perceptions of TPT into the second part of the interview.

The second part of the interview involved a think-aloud procedure (Charters, 2003; Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Pressley & Afflerback, 1995). A think-aloud procedure was appropriate, given that this methodology enables simultaneous multimodal capture of visual screen data, vocal commentary, and user behaviors. Additionally, this procedure has successfully been used in new literacies research to explore usability processes and digital practices (e.g., Asselin & Maoyeri, 2010; Kohnen et al., 2020).

Prior to the think-aloud, Gillian (Author 1) previewed the think-aloud text with participants and asked participants to practice thinking aloud. All participants were familiar with using think-alouds in a classroom context and expressed comfort with the procedure. During the think-aloud task, participants were asked to share their computer screen with Gillian. Then, participants were tasked with finding a resource to teach with and were encouraged to use their authentic classroom practices. If participants could not identify a skill or concept to teach, Gillian suggested “identifying the main idea in a text” as a generic starting point. As participants reviewed the site, they were encouraged to think-aloud regarding their decisions, perceptions, and choices. The task would end when the participant found a source that they would be willing to use in the classroom.

Following the think-aloud task’s conclusion, participants were asked how they might implement this resource in the classroom, as well as invited to provide any final commentary. During interviews, Gillian collected informal notes; following interviews, she wrote analytic memos on each interview (e.g., “It seems that the participant’s primary focus for resources is their editability.”). As an informal member-checking measure, Gillian summarized their perception of the participant’s perceptions of and practices on the TPT platform for participant commentary and revision at the end of the interview. A complete protocol for the think-aloud procedure used in this study is available in the [appendix](#).

## **Data Analysis**

Prior to analysis, interviews were transcribed and unitized. Analytic memos were reviewed, and each interview was rewatched prior to the first round of analysis. The first round of analysis involved open coding (Saldaña, 2016) and memoing across the six interviews. Open coding was guided by broad categories related to the research question. Open coding was used to assemble a preliminary codebook designed to capture behaviors observed and perspectives shared in participants’ exploration of TPT. We open-coded half the interview corpus separately to create the first iteration of the codebook, then we met to review the codebook and corroborate coding of remaining transcripts.

For second-round coding, focused coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used to construct categories comprised of significant codes found across the data corpus. Second-round focused coding began by constructing initial categories around perspectives of TPT use in classrooms, including “commonly used,” “institutional mistrust,” “modeled practices,” “assumption of TPT creators as altruistic” and “critiques of TPT resources/users.”

Categories developed following corroboration included “tensions around TPT use,” “time spent finding or creating resources,” “money spent on TPT resources,” and “the role of teacher-entrepreneurs on TPT.” During second-round coding, some codes were collapsed into larger umbrella codes (e.g., “finite resources”).

Third-round coding involved establishing key assertions (Erickson, 1986) and corroborating analysis. The finalized codebook was used to code two

transcripts and corroborate findings. Through discussion, intercoder convergence was resolved to 100%.

## **Results**

This section presents multiple tensions that emerged from the data, as related to teacher perceptions of trustworthiness, ubiquity, and resource demands related to TPT use. Interviews revealed that TPT is commonly used within and across many of these novice teachers' landscape of practice. Participants identified varying degrees of institutional mistrust of TPT curriculum, as well as widely ranging modeled practices from teacher mentors that sometimes conflicted or aligned with their own use or desired use of TPT. Participants also presented varying perspectives on the authoritativeness of TPT sellers, curriculum marketplaces as altruistic platforms, and the affordances and constraints of TPT for managing finite resources. Direct quotations are identified as emerging from the interview — the first half of the interview/think-aloud sequence — or the think-aloud.

### **Modeled Practices in Schools**

As early career teachers, many of our participants referenced attitudes within teacher preparation programs and school context norms regarding using curriculum on TPT. We characterized this pervasive attitude toward TPT that participants referenced as 'institutional mistrust': a general suspicion toward TPT resources that are unvetted and evaluated. This attitude is noted in TPT scholarship (Carpenter et al., 2022; Curcio et al., 2023).

Many participants described first encountering TPT in their teacher preparation programs. During her interview, 1st-year teacher Erin mentioned hearing that "TPT is kind of like Pinterest, where it's okay to look at, but probably don't actually use it. Make sure you look through it, make sure you modify what you need." Erin's professors warned against uncritical implementation of TPT resources, but seemingly supported using TPT as a proverbial marketplace of ideas. By this logic, teachers can browse TPT's curricular offerings and modify resources for their own instruction but should not trust TPT intrinsically.

Additionally, some participants disclosed experiencing modeled practices in their student teaching placements that contradicted teacher educator advice to critically evaluate and modify materials. During her interview, 1st-year teacher Christina described her mentor teacher from her student teaching placement as "going on [TPT] every day and getting a lesson 10 minutes before the lesson started."

Christina viewed this behavior as a nonexample, noting, "I wasn't going to do that," and exclaiming, "Oh wow, these are the teachers that they told us not to be like." But within the same sentence, Christina worked to justify her mentor teacher's behaviors by explaining that her mentor teacher was retiring that year, and they were working with a "behaviorally challenging class, so content instruction was kind of a miracle." And in a nod to the role of professional expertise, Christina indicated that her mentor teacher

“has been a teacher for 20+ years, so she knew what she was looking for. She had her thing.”

Participants' early career experiences in their first classroom teaching jobs also colored their perceptions of TPT use. Some participants were mentored into adopting TPT curriculum seeking as part of their teaching practice. During her interview, 1st-year teacher Beatriz said that she was encouraged to use TPT by her mother, a speech-language pathologist. Beatriz described her mother sharing TPT resources, saying, “She also helps me do all my preschool stuff. So, she’s like ‘Look what I found, it was on Teachers Pay Teachers for a dollar.’ I had to get it.” Similarly, during their think-alouds, Erin and Taylor both described members of their grade-level teams sharing TPT resources, such as bundles of editable graphic organizers.

Institutional condemnation and restriction of TPT access was also common, however. At Mackenzie’s school, TPT was blocked by the school’s Internet filter. During her interview, Angelica reported that her school recommended against using TPT resources, because “that’s not research based.” She continued, “Everybody still uses it, but it’s not, like, what we’re basing our teaching on.”

Angelica described using TPT resources to support her daily classroom teaching practice, such as developing center activities and finding labels for classroom organization. Moreover, the participants who reported using TPT the least readily acknowledged that they had other educational resources to scaffold existing curriculum. For example, during the think-aloud portion of Taylor’s interview, she mentioned that her school had a StoryWorks (<https://storyworks.scholastic.com/>) subscription that she used as a supplement. In her words, having additional flexible resources provided by the school led to less TPT use, because “that was already handed to me.”

### **Perceived Utility**

All participants approached TPT with an assumption of ubiquitous use, with some variation in intensity or frequency. In her interview, Mackenzie said, “I feel like any teacher I know uses it, whether it’s, you know, frequently or just here and there.” And although perceived institutional mistrust appeared across all participant interviews, most participants indicated a prevalence of TPT resources despite these attitudes.

During her think-aloud recording, Taylor, a 2nd-year teacher, expressed mixed feelings about TPT critiques from teacher educators and school administrators:

I feel like in undergrad programs there’s a big push that, like, you need to create everything from scratch always. And it is very beneficial to do that, ‘cause you go through all of the steps of doing it and you know how to do it. But it’s important to let upcoming teachers know it’s okay. I think, like, we are each other’s best resource. So, use the resources. ... I wish there wasn’t that negative mindset, stigma, towards [TPT]. I remember there would be small things like here’s a perfect version of [a resource] ready for me.

But like, I have to go make my own and make it look nothing like this, because I don't want my professors to think I'm copying it ... and it's very stressful. And it's hard, especially being a beginning career teacher, it's already overwhelming enough.

Taylor was responding to her own frustration that she would find a "perfect version" of a graphic organizer on TPT and then would have to recreate the graphic organizer for her own assignments during her teacher preparation program. Similarly, 1st-year teachers Beatriz, Angelica, and Erin expressed appreciation for how helpful TPT resources have been during their 1st year of teaching. In Taylor's estimation, "making a diagram is not copying. You can only do so many compare and contrast circles." Curiously, there was no subsequent discussion of how to cite these curriculum resources as a source when submitting lesson plans for teacher preparation courses.

There was a consistent emphasis among all six participants on modifying resources from TPT before delivering instruction to better align with curriculum or with students' developmental needs. For example, Erin, Christina, and Angelica all described paying attention to fonts and letter formation when selecting curriculum for their emergent literacy students. In her think-aloud, Angelica pushed back on the "Pinterest aesthetic" of many TPT resources, arguing,

A lot of teachers want that aesthetically pleasing, cute looking classroom... but that's the issue that I have with some of these things, that they're trying to be so aesthetically pleasing to themselves, but their kids can't read that. ... Of course, challenging fonts are going to be in books, but it's good for them to see that. And I can't change a published book.

Angelica and other participants emphasized that the adaptability of resources on TPT was part of their appeal, and that they actively look for editable resources. As Mackenzie thought aloud, "That way, I can tweak it as needed."

Across interviews, participants appeared to be working to make sense of the platform's applicability to their developing practice. For example, Taylor, a 2nd-year teacher was reluctant to ask her new colleagues for support. During her interview, she explained,

Last year, I was a 1st-year teacher, and I felt a little, like, self-conscious about going up to my peers and colleagues and asking them things. Teachers Pay Teachers was kind of a resource where I was like, "Oh, this is a good idea, I can use this in my classroom or implement this."

Taylor saw TPT as a method for connecting with teachers by "reading their thoughts" and "getting ideas" from others in her field without directly pestering her colleagues with questions. In this way, Taylor viewed TPT as another version of teacher community that mentored her through developing lesson ideas.

Along the same lines, many participants expressed an assumption of TPT creators, and in the platform itself, as altruistic. This perspective was particularly emphasized by 1st-year teacher participants, such as Christina and Angelica. During her interview, Christina said, “I don’t know the origin story, but I feel like TPT was created to help teachers, but it’s ultimately to help the students.” This assumption of altruistic intent may stem from the branding of TPT as a teacher-centric curriculum marketplace.

Similarly, Angelica asserted in her interview, “Obviously, no teacher is going to make something that is not of use to their students,” as she expressed that she trusted TPT as a source for supplements and scaffolds for centers instruction, rather than for whole group teaching. She continued,

Nothing is going to hurt them aside from if they cannot read [the resource] because of the font. Sure, maybe it’s not research-based that rolling or coloring is going to make them understand that sight word, but it’s also not going to hurt them. It’s good for their tracking.

Angelica and Christina’s assumptions that TPT is a legitimate part of the educational landscape of practice informed why they sought out these resources, yet both Angelica and Christina emphasized that TPT resources are used as scaffolds, centers activities, and classroom decorations. Similarly, 1st-year teacher Beatriz explained during her think-aloud that because she was new to classroom teaching, “I don’t have a collection of prior materials. So, I am utilizing a lot of the free things on there that I can use to decorate the room or anything.” Beatriz was not afraid to give TPT her financial information and was unconcerned that the site would “steal her information.”

### **Finite Resources**

Certain tensions characterized teacher participants’ perceptions of TPT as a curriculum marketplace. These tensions include time spent looking for TPT resources versus time spent creating resources and money spent on TPT resource versus using school-provided resources.

Time is a precious and scarce resource in teaching. In the United States, teachers are often salaried for 40 hours a week, and most of those hours are contact hours with students. Regular planning periods are not always guaranteed, so time for instructional planning must be used strategically. As early career teachers and graduate students, study participants were attuned to this tension around time and factored this tension into their perspectives on TPT. Taylor began her interview by directly addressing tensions around time, saying “I’m not going to pretend that I invent everything. There’s not enough time in the day, unfortunately.”

Some participants viewed TPT as an information source that saves time by providing access to ready-made curricular artifacts. As Angelica put it during her think-aloud, “As teachers, we have so much to plan for already. Planning centers — I don’t want to take tons of time to create all these

resources. And then there are some good, like, just kind of filler activities.” Taylor reasoned aloud,

If [a resource is] there and if it helps others, why can't I use it to help my own [students]? I don't ever want them to miss out on an activity or a lesson because I didn't have enough time to create it from scratch.

Further, during her think-aloud Beatriz described a similar attraction toward quick-and-easy educational resources on TPT, saying “I have to start somewhere.”

However, participants were also reluctant to spend their valuable planning time searching for resources on TPT. As Mackenzie thought aloud, “I hate spending more than 20 minutes scrolling to find what I want. If I haven't figured it out within 20 minutes, then okay, I can't find what I'm looking for. I'm just going to do it myself.” Angelica expressed a similar sentiment near the end of her think-aloud: “I feel like I am pretty picky. It's like, why would I waste my time when I could just do this myself?” Even when Angelica encountered resources that might have been useful, she was resistant to using materials that would require any redesigning of her curriculum.

All participants highlighted the marketplace nature of TPT resources. The decision to spend personal funds on school resources appeared challenging for everyone interviewed. Participants expressed a reluctance to spend their salary on classroom resources, and this inclination led them to often seek out free resources or highly adaptable resources. During her think-aloud, 1st-year teacher Christina described making a daily cost/benefit analysis between purchasing noninstructional resources on TPT in contrast to the other ways she could spend her teacher salary:

If I pay for my resume template, great. That's my own money. ... But when you buy the lessons, it's like ... “You already have a curriculum, why are you spending your money?” We're not paid a lot in the first place. It would be like \$4 every day. That's great that you want to spend it on your class, but that's coffee! And for me, my four-dollar grande coffee is worth more than a lesson that I could plan myself ... but if making it would take six hours, okay. I'll spend \$3 of my own money.

For Christina, deciding to spend money on TPT resources involved balancing the potential benefit of the resource against the amount of time it would take to create the resource herself. This sort of decision-making was also expressed by 1st-year teachers Angelica, Erin, and Beatriz.

Angelica, self-described as “pretty picky” regarding the curricular resources she is willing to pay for, reasoned aloud that “because we're given so many resources through our curriculum and everything, I just don't want to spend too much money on the things that I don't need to.” So, she always uses the free filter when browsing for curricular resources, particularly due to the multiplicity of resources to which she has access.

Beatriz, another frequent user of the free filter, described TPT during her think-aloud as “so, so, so convenient because there’s so many free things where so much of being a 1st-year teacher is so expensive.” Being able to find free or cheap resources that she can use for “the rest of [her] career now” was a highly compelling aspect of the TPT platform.

Several participants described prioritizing flexible and reusable resources when making purchases on TPT. As Mackenzie explained in her think-aloud, “I switch things up so much. I don’t want to pay \$3 for [one activity] when I’ll probably do it two times.” Similarly, during her think-aloud Erin expressed hesitation over purchasing grade-specific resources for an annual position: “At the end of this, I might teach a different grade. I don’t want to be buying things if I will never teach that grade again.” Erin showed us her TPT downloads folder and explained that all downloaded resources, save one, were free. Erin purchased this resource because, she reasoned, “It’s something I could use for every single year, no matter what I’m teaching. I could make this for any grade.”

## **Discussion**

Like Sawyer, Dredger, et al. (2020), our findings suggest that these early career teachers are likely to use TPT regardless of administrative or scholarly critique of the platform. What’s more compelling, perhaps, is *how* our participants framed TPT as a resource within their emerging conception of the educational landscape of practice. Participants’ negotiation of TPT as a component of the landscape of practice appeared to reflect their ongoing negotiation of their identities as teachers (as described in Schaefer, 2013). Though teacher educators strive to prepare beginning teachers for the realities of the profession, most new teachers report entering the workforce with idealized preconceptions of the story of teaching (Alsup, 2019). Once well and truly in the field, as Flores and Day (2006) described, novice teachers tend to assume an attitude of strategic compliance, adapting to the situational and institutional constraints of their role.

We conceptualized our participants’ reported perspectives and use of TPT and its resources as part of these early-career teachers’ ongoing negotiation of their positionality within their new profession: a navigation of tensions regarding engaging in strategic compliance regarding particular institutional norms and the teaching practice they wish to cultivate. Participants’ strategic use of TPT speaks to their understanding of and resistance to certain features of the profession.

For example, all participants had encountered perceptions of TPT as untrustworthy, yet most continued incorporating TPT into their practice to supplement instruction. None of the participants spoke of their use of TPT as an act of compliance. Rather, their self-positioning in relation to TPT and the landscape of practice demonstrates a resistance to outdated conceptions of teachers as entirely self-sacrificing (Alsup, 2019). It is no secret in teacher preparation programs that contract hours are insufficient to cover the workload of teaching (Voet & De Wever, 2020). Preservice and new teachers expect to allocate many hours of their technically free time (i.e., evenings and weekends) to creating curriculum, grading papers, collating assessment data, and so on. Our participants’ use of TPT

resources, especially in the face of repeated discouragement from voices of authority, reads as an act of resistance to that narrative of sacrifice and an expressed desire to shift both practice and expectations toward personal sustainability within the teaching profession.

This interpretation is further bolstered by participants' thoughtful explanations about their decision-making related to supplementary resources on TPT. Our participants readily acknowledged the near constant juggling of demands on their time (as also documented in Melnick & Meister, 2008) and demonstrated their internal hierarchies for which tasks deserve the most energy. Multiple participants in their 1st year of teaching emphasized that they did not use TPT resources as the crux of their instruction; rather, participants incorporated TPT resources into their developing practice as scaffolds, enrichment, or supplementation (as also found by Silver, 2022).

Their unapologetic description of these decisions — “We have so much to plan for already... I don't want to take tons of time to create all these resources” — position the practice as entirely reasonable. They either implied or overtly asked, “Is it truly so terrible for early-career educators to offload this labor?” Although scholars have rightfully critiqued the content and educational merit of resources on TPT, there remains a practical impetus for early career teacher use of TPT as they develop their own pedagogies.

Simultaneously, we remain concerned about many of the preconceived notions about TPT expressed within this small sample: Angelica indicated that there was nothing on TPT that was going to hurt kids, which contradicts scholarly findings that TPT resources contain inaccuracies (Hertel & Wessman-Enzinger, 2017), low-level-cognitive tasks (Sawyer et al., 2019), or racist content (Rodríguez et al., 2020). Indeed, TPT's role within the educational landscape as a purported democratic marketplace is, as Brown (2015) argued, absent of several essential conditions of educational democracy: “informed passion, respectful deliberation, aspirational sovereignty, sharp containment of powers that would overrule or undermine it” (p. 14). Chief among these powers may be the for-profit nature of this curricular marketplace, further enhanced by TPT's recent acquisition by American technological company IXL Learning (Caffrey, 2023).

The supposedly open marketplace of TPT is already based on curricular vendor popularity, and the platform-based architecture of the TPT marketplace encourages purchase of popular materials rather than the critical cultivation practices (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022) or processes of information seeking, adaptation, and implementation common in curriculum supplementation (Silver, 2022). We echo Brown et al.'s (2023) call to trouble the presentation of TPT and other for-profit curricular marketplaces as democratized public locales for professional collaboration.

The discourse around TPT mirrors concerns about other community-created informational resources, such as Wikipedia. Initially deemed less credible due to its mutable nature, Wikipedia faced significant academic criticism compared to traditional print encyclopedias (Kittur et al., 2008; Sahut & Tricot, 2018). Despite this, Wikipedia has become one of the most

frequently used internet sites, with studies supporting the veracity and credibility of its entries (Sahut & Tricot, 2018). However, public trust remains low, and educators often caution against its use. Wikipedia, as a tertiary source, can provide a credible initial understanding of a concept (Singer et al., 2017).

Similarly, TPT challenges traditional notions of rigorous curriculum supplementation. As technological innovations continue to democratize information creation and dissemination, teacher educators may need to reconceptualize credible sources of curriculum.

## **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the perspectives of early career elementary teachers on supplemental teaching materials available on TPT, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, this exploratory study's small sample size of six participants limits the generalizability of our findings. The insights gathered from these few participants may not fully represent the broader population of early career elementary teachers. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the validity and applicability of the results.

Second, data collection relied on a single recorded think-aloud interview with each participant. This snapshot approach captures a momentary perspective rather than a comprehensive understanding of teachers' use of TPT materials over time. Multiple interviews conducted longitudinally would provide a richer and more nuanced picture of ways teachers' interactions with TPT evolve throughout the school year.

Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for bias. Participants' descriptions of their use of TPT materials and their perceptions of TPT's reputation are subjective and may not accurately reflect their actual practices. Observational data from participants' classrooms would help corroborate self-reported information and provide a more objective assessment of how TPT resources are implemented in practice.

Finally, this study did not account for variability in the quality of materials selected by participants. Since TPT is a marketplace with resources created by a wide range of sellers, the quality and pedagogical soundness of selected materials might vary significantly. Investigating these participants' information literacy skills was the focus of a subsequent analysis (see Mertens & Adams, in press).

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

TPT and other online curriculum marketplaces are likely to remain integral to the educational landscape, and it would be negligent for teacher educators and those who support early career teachers to continue vilifying these platforms. Instead, teacher educators should focus on developing teacher candidates' critical curriculum cultivation practices (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). Teacher educators can continue to trouble the assumption that TPT is altruistic and apolitical simply because of its

democratized nature (Hunter & Hall, 2018) while remaining attuned to early career teachers' needs for curricular support.

Participants frequently mentioned local policies reflecting administrative and teacher-educator bias against TPT resources. Some schools discourage or even block access to TPT using web filters. These policies raise questions about whether they align with recognizing teachers as professionals. The early career teachers in this study were determined to find resources that supplement, not supplant, existing vetted curricula. Despite their early career stage, these teachers prioritized their students' learning and systematically evaluated supplemental resources.

Administrators concerned about TPT usage may engage in open-ended conversations with teachers. By discussing how resources are evaluated and implemented, administrators can support critical curriculum cultivation practices (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022) while maintaining fidelity to curricular standards. This dialog can foster a more collaborative and respectful approach to resource selection, recognizing teachers' professional judgment.

From Taylor's interview, it is evident that many teacher candidates are already modifying TPT-sourced materials to meet course assignment requirements. Teacher educators should consider designing assignments that invite students to locate, critique, and justify the use of TPT resources. Framing TPT resources as supplements, as many participants did, can enhance teachers' capacity to critically evaluate online resources. This approach can be particularly beneficial for those still becoming familiar with the educational landscape.

Additionally, ongoing professional development opportunities focusing on digital literacy and resource evaluation should be provided to both preservice and in-service teachers. This continuous learning can support teachers in adapting to the evolving landscape of online educational resources and integrating them effectively into their practice.

Furthermore, policy makers should consider the implications of restrictive policies on TPT use. Instead of blanket bans, a more nuanced approach that involves guidelines for evaluating and using TPT resources may be more effective. Such guidelines can help ensure that teachers are equipped to make informed decisions about the materials they incorporate into their teaching. Through such changes in perspective, early career teachers will be better supported in navigating the complexities of curriculum marketplaces like TPT, ultimately enhancing their professional practice and improving educational outcomes for their students.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this exploratory study indicate that supporting early career teachers in developing critical curriculum cultivation practices is far from a simple process (Drake, 2021). Yet, readers can remain optimistic about *how* these early career teachers nuance their perspective of TPT as they come to navigate the educational landscape of practice. TPT was far from the only credible source of curriculum that these teachers identified, and indeed, participants with more teaching experience seemed to move

slightly further away from TPT as a source for curriculum. As teachers become more experienced within the educational professional landscape, they appear to apply this experience to their curricular information-seeking practices on TPT. For example, multiple early-grade teachers mentioned the “cutesy” fonts popular on TPT as damaging to their students’ developing conception of letter formation. Future research may consider exploring how teachers’ professional knowledge — knowledge of the landscape of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as well as their information literacy practices around online instructional resources — informs educators’ curricular supplementation from marketplaces like TPT.

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## Appendix Think-Aloud Protocol

Note: In this type of research, meaning is established not by incanting a series of words but by establishing intersubjective agreement with the person you are interviewing. Review the following sections with particular attention to any section parked “SAY THIS,” but speak it naturally rather than reading it off. The goal is participant understanding, not word-for-word repetition.

### Set-up

- Open the Zoom meeting room before the participant arrives
- Ensure that meeting recordings are saving locally (Settings > Recordings)
- Confirm that the participant has completed the consent form
- Check screen-recording capacity, audio, and visual settings on Zoom, as well as internet connection
- Prepare a pastable link to TPT for the participant:  
<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/>

### Introductions & Informed Consent Review

- Welcome participant into Zoom room
- SAY THIS: *“As you know, we’re very interested in understanding how early career elementary teachers think about curricular resources found on online marketplaces like Teachers Pay Teachers. We’re so happy that you’re going to participate in our research. In a few minutes, I’m going to give you a scenario and ask you to find some curriculum on TPT that you might use in your classroom. You’ll do a think-aloud while searching, so we can learn more about how you’re thinking. We’re here to learn from you, so be as authentic as possible.”*
- Review informed consent with the participant and ask the participant if they have any questions about the informed consent or research process
- Have the participant type their name into the informed consent Google form
- Ask the participant if you can begin screen recording
- If consent is given, click on the Zoom record button (see image below)



### Pre-Interview Questions

1. What do you think about Teachers Pay Teachers?
2. What's TPT's reputation amongst the teachers you know?
3. What might you use Teachers Pay Teachers to find, if anything?
4. What are you teaching now?

### Practice Think-Aloud (optional; 2-5 mins)

- SAY THIS: *"We're going to begin now. One of the best ways to find out what people are thinking is to have them talk aloud while they work on various problems. In a few minutes, as you examine some websites and information online, I would like you to say out loud everything that you might say to yourself silently. Just act as if you are alone in the room speaking to yourself."*

*This can feel strange at first, but most people get the hang of it pretty quickly. When people first do this, they commonly make one of two mistakes: (1) they stop talking or (2) they analyze their own thoughts more than they typically would. There are some things that will help you think aloud:*

*First, just say whatever is on your mind. Don't hold back even if you just have hunches or guesses. Some people are nervous about saying things that they think might not be right or are too embarrassed to just say what's on their mind. Don't be nervous about this – remember, I am not here to test what you know or judge what you are saying in any way.*

*Second, speak as continuously as possible. Try to say something at least every five seconds – even if it is only to tell me you are not sure what to think. If you fall silent for a few seconds, I might remind you to think aloud by simply saying, 'tell me what you are thinking.'*

*Also, try to speak clearly so that the recorder can pick up what you are saying. Sometimes people cover their mouths or let their voice drop as they become deep in thought. If this happens, I may remind you to speak more loudly."*

- Check if the participant has any questions
- SAY THIS: *"Okay, great! Let's get started. I am putting a link to Google in the chat. Would you please open this link and then share your screen with me?"*

*We're going to start with some practice to help you get used to thinking aloud. First, I'd like you to imagine that you're planning to go to the movies this weekend and want to see what's playing. How would you find this information online? You can get started whenever you're ready."*

- Give participant any feedback about thinking aloud while information seeking. You may need to model thinking aloud in

order to help him/her understand what to do. If the participant is doing a good job, reinforce what he/she is doing well.

- Check if the participant has any questions

### **TPT Think-Aloud**

- **SAY THIS:** *“In a moment, I’m going to send you a link to Teachers Pay Teachers for you to access while sharing your screen. Once I show you the website, I want you to imagine that you need to find a classroom resource on Teachers Pay Teachers to use while teaching.*

*As you look for a resource, feel free to act like you would if you were using this website at home: you can click wherever, scroll wherever, visit links, or open new tabs. You can and should do anything you normally would online—all while talking out loud.”*

*If participant teaches K-2, say: Imagine you’ll be teaching long “A” and short “A” sounds or main idea. Please look for curricular resources that you might use to teach while teaching and let me know when you’ve found a resource you’d like to use.*

*If participant teaches 3-5, say: Imagine you’ll be teaching about linking words (like another, for example, because) OR main idea. Please look for curricular resources that you might use while teaching and let me know when you’ve found a resource you’d like to use.”*

- Paste the link <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/> and scenario into Zoom chat for reference
- Help participant to share screen so that the interview was watch them navigate TPT
- Remind participants to think aloud if necessary, but otherwise observe and take notes for ~5-8 minutes.
- After ~5-8 minutes have passed, if necessary, ask participants *“Have you found any resources that you might want to use to teach?”*

Additional probes if needed:

- *“What parts of the website were useful when you evaluated the source?”*
- *“What was most important to you while evaluating curriculum?”*
- *“Why did you select this resource?”*
- *“Why this resource and not that resource?”*

As a final question, ask *“On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not confident at all and 5 being very confident, about how confident are you that this resource is a useful piece of curriculum?”*

- At the end of the interview, turn off the Zoom recording and thank the participant for their participation before ending the meeting.

### **Post Protocol Researcher Responsibilities**

- Complete an entry into the data log file
- Upload videos to repository
- Upload notes