



Article



## **Lived Experiences of Adventist Curriculum Planners in Curriculum Design at Timor-Leste Adventist International School**

**Arjem Noryn C. Agum**

### **Abstract**

Curriculum planning and design is a complex process requiring sustained creativity and critical judgment. While curriculum development has been widely studied, limited research examines the experiences of faith-based curriculum planners working within underregulated national policy contexts. Notably, empirical research on Adventist curriculum planning in Timor-Leste remains scarce, despite the presence of one Adventist school operating five branches nationwide. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Adventist curriculum planners at Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS). Guided by curriculum theory, the study employed purposive sampling and conducted semi-structured interviews with two curricularists, supported by teacher interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis for triangulation. Data were analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological framework. Findings revealed tensions among faith-based curricular identity, fragmented policy guidance, and a missionary-led staffing structure, resulting in policy ambiguity, limited resources, and frequent staff turnover. Curriculum planners assumed multifaceted responsibilities with minimal formal preparation, experiencing intellectual, emotional, and physical strain alongside optimism for development. The study contributes to curriculum theory by illustrating faith-informed practice and underscores the need for contextualized curriculum development, clearer policy frameworks, and sustainable curriculum leadership in faith-based international schools.

### **Keywords**

Curriculum planners, curriculum design, Timor-Leste, Adventist education, curricularists

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## **Introduction**

Curriculum has been defined in many ways at different times. For instance, Coşkun Yaşar and Aslan (2021) view curriculum as an educational constitution that governs the education system and delineates the behavior of an individual in society. Pak et al. (2020) summarized the three concepts of curriculum used in an educational setting. First is the intended curriculum, which refers to the standardized system of curriculum followed by schools, such as academic standards. Next is the enacted curriculum, which refers to how these standards are implemented by teachers in their classes. The final concept is the attained curriculum, defined as the actual learning that students gain from the lessons in their classes. Although there are other types of curriculum, these three are deemed to be the primary standards in the academe. Curriculum acts as a guide in institutions. However, along with its vitality in education, curricularists worldwide face various challenges in curriculum planning and design.

Congruently, curriculum planning is the actual construction of the content of a study matter and the determination of the most effective methods to deliver this content (Chiu & Chai, 2020). They further explained that curriculum planning is instrumental to the enhancement of student learning and competencies, with a focus on assessing student outcomes. Hence, adopting a specific curriculum plan and design tailored to an academic institution or a district has a huge effect on pedagogy. On the other hand, Button (2021) defined curriculum design as the structure or organization of the curriculum while curriculum development includes planning, implementation, and assessment of the curriculum. Therefore, curriculum development needs models as a guide in developing the curriculum.

### *Types of Curriculum Designs*

Curriculum design encloses diversified approaches that cater to educational goals contextualized to the actual needs of a specific learning environment. Types of curriculum design is a well-studied topic in literature, with each type containing distinct characteristics and purposes. Epler (2020) discussed in a study three types of curriculum design. First is subject-focused design which prioritizes disciplinary content and curriculum organization revolving around specific subjects. Next is a learner-focus curriculum design centering on the specific needs and experiences of the learners, wherein the curriculum adapts to each identified area of development. Last is the problem-focused design, another type of curriculum design that integrates problem-solving as a focal factor in encouraging learners to engage with real-world concerns. In addition, Senior et al. (2024) contended that there are additional curriculum designs besides the three mentioned. It was added that curriculum design is dependent on the needs of an institution, hence it entails advantages and disadvantages.

As a multifaceted process that takes on various forms, each curriculum design has its advantages and potential drawbacks. Moreover, curriculum design depends on an institution's educational context and objectives. The diversity of designs reflects the complex educational needs and the importance of ensuring that the design is tailored to each need with the aim of achieving the desired learning outcomes (Epler, 2020; Senior et al., 2024).

### ***Challenges in Curriculum Planning and Designing***

Alongside curriculum planning and designing in the education system are the challenges that curricularists face. For instance, Polikoff (2018) summarized some of the challenges that curriculum planners face, i.e., determining high-quality materials, corroborating with schools so they adopt the materials, and ensuring that teachers effectively utilize the materials. Other challenges include making the new curriculum understandable and adoptable for teaching professionals in any school system to easily gauge and implement the planned and designed curriculum (Allen & Penuel, 2015 as cited in Pak et al., 2020).

Similarly, curriculum planners and designers in Adventist institutions also face various challenges in planning and designing their curricula. The challenges in Adventist curriculum planning and designing are multifaceted. Because of the lack of facilities and the negative impact of corporal punishment on the teacher-learner relationship, one significant challenge that Allida and Ojwan'g (2023) posited was the implementation of nurturing programs. Another challenge is the contextualization of the curriculum in Adventist institutions especially in terms of the integration of faith in learning (Nwaomah, 2020). Student diversity is also a highlighted challenge. In a study conducted by Freire and Maia (2023), it was found that despite the benefits acquired in differentiated instruction for inclusive education, teachers' assumptions and beliefs about curriculum and curriculum planning hinder them from consistently implementing differentiated instructions.

Adventist curriculum planning and designing face various challenges related to the implementation of nurturing programs, contextualization of the gospel, and differentiated instructions. Addressing these challenges requires an eclectic approach that considers the diverse needs of all the stakeholders in an educational system as well as the broader church community.

As a young and the sole Adventist school in Timor-Leste, there is a scarcity of studies that focus on the planning and designing of the curriculum at Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS). It has been challenging for curriculum designers to develop a curriculum that is tailored to the context of TAIS. Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of Adventist curriculum planners in curriculum design in Adventist Schools in Timor-Leste. The specific research questions are:

1. What are the lived experiences of the curriculum planners in curriculum design at TAIS?
2. What are the contexts of the lived experiences of the curriculum planners in curriculum design at TAIS?
3. How do the curriculum planners of TAIS view themselves in the future?

## **METHODS**

### ***Approach***

To gather in-depth and rich information about the topic at hand, a qualitative research approach was employed in this study. Busetto et al. (2020) contextualize qualitative research as the study of the nature of a phenomenon including its quality, manifestations, and perceptions while excluding its range, frequency, or place in the context of cause and effect. The qualitative approach in research involves gathering and analyzing non-numerical data such as texts, videos, or audio to identify concepts, perceptions, and experiences (Bhandari, 2023). In this study, the lived experiences of the curriculum planners of the sole Adventist school in Timor-Leste was explored.

### Research Design

This qualitative study utilized phenomenological design to delve into the lived experiences of Adventist curriculum planners in curriculum design in Timor-Leste. Neubauer et al. (2019) and Qutoshi (2018) defined phenomenology as a methodological in-depth exploration of diversified challenging experiences to find realities through phenomena in interconnected individual experiences. This study explored the lived experiences of Adventist curriculum planners which encompass the curricular plans and visions they hold in fulfilling their roles.

### Study Participants

The participants of this study were the Adventist curriculum former principal and deputy principal in Timor-Leste who were chosen through a purposive sampling technique. As the administrators of the school, they were the authorized people to plan and design the school's curriculum. The inclusion criteria were: (a) experienced administrators of TAIS; (b) has served TAIS for at least 2 years; (c) has taken part in designing TAIS curriculum.

Timor-Leste is the youngest country in Southeast Asia and the newest member of the Southern-Asia Pacific Division (SSD) of Seventh-Day Adventists. Timor-Leste has one Adventist mission responsible for the welfare of small churches and company churches all over the country. Currently, there is only one Adventist school in the country under the name Timor-Leste Adventist International School (TAIS), which was established and has been thriving since 2015. While the main school is located in Dili, Timor-Leste, it has expanded and branched out to four other districts in the country in 2023. To this date, TAIS has branches in Baucau, Los Palos, Same, and Viqueque besides the main school in Dili.

**Table 1.**

### Interview Guide Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions (Lifeworld)
Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of the curriculum planners in curriculum design at TAIS?	List at least 4 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What was your job prior to coming to TAIS?</li> <li>What is/was/were the position/s you held/are holding in TAIS?</li> <li>Is curriculum planning part of your job description?</li> <li>What aspects of your life intimately connected with curriculum planning at TAIS stand out for you? Recall a story of your life.</li> <li>What incidents intimately connected with curriculum planning at TAIS stand out for you?</li> </ol>
Research question 2: What are the contexts of the lived experiences of the curriculum planners in curriculum design at TAIS?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does your being one of the curriculum planners affect you? What changes do you associate as a consequence of your being a curriculum planner at TAIS?</li> <li>How does curriculum planning</li> </ol>

	<p>at TAIS affect the significant others in your life?</p> <p>c. What feelings do you experience when planning the curriculum for TAIS? How are those feelings generated?</p> <p>d. What thoughts and bodily changes have you experienced as a curriculum planner of TAIS? How are they generated?</p> <p>e. Have you shared all that is significant regarding your curriculum planning at TAIS?</p>
<p>Research question 3: How do the curriculum planners of TAIS view themselves in the future?</p>	<p>a. Given as what you have shared regarding your lived experiences as one of the curriculum planners of TAIS, how do you see yourself in the future?</p>

*Data Gathering Procedure*

Prior to the conduct of the interview, a clearance from the university’s ethics review board was acquired and was given the case code 2024-1130. Consent forms were then distributed to the participants to ensure that they understood their participation in the study. They were briefed about the objectives of the study. The researcher also guaranteed that no coercion was done, and participation was voluntary. After acquiring the consent, the participants were asked for a video-recorded interview at their time and convenience. After the interview, the data was transcribed and analyzed. Member-checking was also conducted to ensure that the transcription and analysis were accurate. Moreover, interviews of two teachers, class observation, and activity documentation were conducted for triangulation. An audit trail was also employed to track the procedures taken from the onset until the culmination of this research project. All information was kept confidential and was used for academic purposes only. Once the study was done, the videos were deleted.

*Curriculum Design*

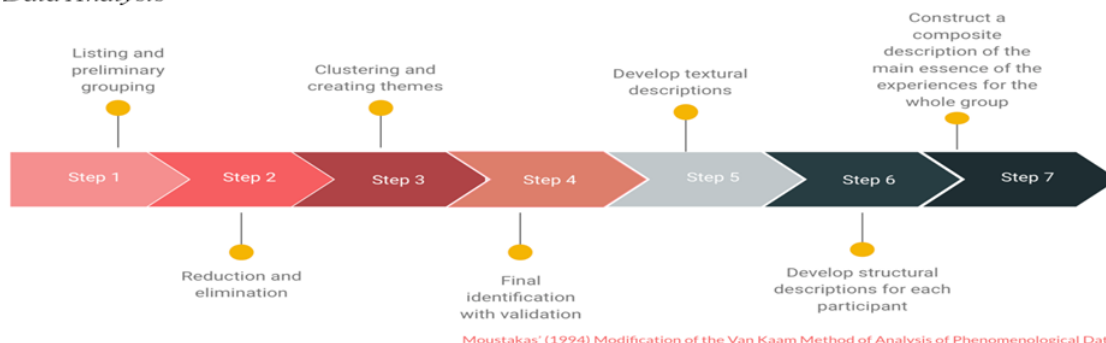
This study was anchored on curriculum theory. Curriculum theory, as McCutcheon (1982) defined it, is a set of analysis, interpretation, and knowledge about curriculum as a phenomenon. Kridel (2010) augmented that curriculum theory deals with the interdisciplinary study of curriculum such as history, politics, race, culture, and biography, to name a few. Hence, curriculum theory is intertwined with people’s lives extending to an individual’s social and cultural upbringing and practices. This theory is deemed fit for the study as the focus of this paper is on curriculum planning and design in the context of the Adventist school curriculum in Timor-Leste.

*Data Analysis*

The data was analyzed using the phenomenological analysis framework by Moustakas (1994). This framework has seven steps namely: listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and creating themes, final identification with validation, developing textual descriptions, developing structural descriptions for each participant, and constructing a composite description of the main essence of the experiences for the group. Figure 1 presents Moustakas’ framework.

Figure 1

*Moustakas’ Phenomenological Approach Framework of Analysis*  
*Data Analysis*



*Reflexivity Statement*

The researcher has gained a theoretical background in curriculum design as a course of study from her bachelor’s to doctoral degree. Although without professional experience in curriculum planning and designing, the researcher was once tasked to improve the TAIS English curriculum for K-12 and develop the Grades 10-12 Research and Grades 11 and 12 Work Immersion. Moreover, as a teacher in TAIS, the researcher has taken part in the implementation of the curriculum in the classroom. These experiences may affect the researcher’s interpretation of the data.

*Authenticity and Trustworthiness*

The deputy principal was interviewed face-to-face. However, the former principal, who currently resides in the United States was asked to comprehensively answer each interview question due to time difference and conflict in schedules. Besides the interview with the main participants, two teachers were also interviewed. Teacher 1 is a Kindergarten teacher who has been serving TAIS for almost two years. She agreed to have a face-to-face interview. Teacher 2 has been serving TAIS as the Portuguese teacher for Grades 4-12 since 2022. Because of her class schedules, she could only respond through private messages on WhatsApp. Class activities and a book’s table of contents were also used as documents. Finally, an observation with one of the Portuguese classes was also conducted. These steps were taken to validate the credibility of the statements from the primary participants.

Table 2  
*Triangulation Methods Used*

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Source 1</i>	<i>Source 2</i>	<i>Source 3</i>
RQ 1	Interviews		
RQ 2	Interviews	Observation	Activity Documentation
RQ 3	Interviews	Observation	

### *Limitations*

As mentioned, TAIS is the only Adventist K-12 school in Timor-Leste. Despite its branching out to four other districts, there is only one principal and one deputy principal supervising all school branches; hence, the small sample size which reflects the school's unique context. While the depth of phenomenological inquiry provides rich insights, the finding remains ungeneralizable. In addition, the researcher's experience in curriculum development and implementation at TAIS may have shaped interpretive perspectives despite reflexive safeguards; therefore, triangulation, member-checking, and audit trails were conducted to mitigate biases on these positionalities.

## **RESULTS**

Administrator 1 was the former principal of TAIS. She earned her degree in Bachelor of Arts in English from an Adventist university in the Philippines. She taught kindergarten for three years from the time she joined TAIS as a missionary teacher in 2015. In 2018, she was given the principal position when the first principal of the school resigned. Administrator 1 held the school principal position for five years until she left in 2023 for a teaching principal position in one of the Adventist elementary schools in the Northern American Division (NAD) in the United States.

Administrator 2 is the current deputy principal. She is a licensed professional teacher with a specialization in mathematics and began her missionary journey at TAIS in 2020. One of her main responsibilities is to develop the school curriculum. Prior to coming to TAIS, she was a missionary teacher in Pakistan, where she taught elementary mathematics.

### *Theme 1: Becoming Curriculum Leaders Without a Map or Mandate.*

Both administrators felt unprepared for the administrative roles assigned to them due to their lack of background in leadership and administration and the belief that their knowledge and experience were insufficient to fit the roles. Due to lack of formal preparation, these curricularists are often accompanied with self-doubt and uncertainty. Rather than feeling empowered by the positions entrusted to them, they frequently question their own competence and credibility as curriculum designers.

Administrator 1 has a degree in Bachelor of Arts in English. Her work experience started with teaching English at a Korean English Academy in the Philippines before going to Timor-Leste as a missionary teacher. Administrator 1 mentioned:

*"I started as a Kindergarten teacher when TAIS first opened in 2015. I taught for 3 years. Then in 2018, I was honored to serve as the second principal of the school when the former principal decided to resign... however, I have no background in curriculum development. At that time, we just used what was provided for us"*

A mathematics major by profession, Administrator 2, used to be a missionary teacher in an Adventist school in Pakistan. Prior to that, she was an ESL teacher in Thailand and a Grade 4 adviser in the Philippines. She emphasized:

*“At first, it’s frustrating and depressing. One of the main reasons I guess is because of my inexperience. I only taught for a few years then I became deputy principal, and one of the responsibilities was to plan for the curriculum. Yes, it’s depressing”*

This sense of being “thrown into” responsibilities without a map or guideline shaped how these curricularists approached decision-making (careful, often hesitant, afraid to commit mistakes). Their experiences reflect not personal failure, but the emotional weight of carrying institutional expectations without the tools, guidance, and expertise associated with such roles.

*Theme 2: Slow Change as a Strategy for Survival and Contextual Fit.*

Curriculum development at TAIS was gradual and marked by small adjustments rather than huge reforms. TAIS was established in 2015 through the leadership of an American principal. At that time, Administrator 1 was already part of the school, serving as a kindergarten teacher. She stated that the school adopted “the NAD curriculum for elementary schools. It was the decision made by the first principal...” When the first principal decided to return to her home country, Administrator 1 was appointed as the new principal. During this time, Administrator 1 recognized the need to adapt NAD (the inherited foreign curriculum) to local learners. Along the way, she noticed mismatches between some areas of the curriculum the needs of Asian learners, teachers’ readiness, and institutional stability. Administrator 1 recognized the necessity of hiring a deputy principal to develop a curriculum better tailored to TAIS learners.

This was affirmed by Administrator 2. She reiterated that curriculum development is part of her job description. She stated, “...being the deputy principal, it’s part of my job description to make sure that we have a proper curriculum in the school.” She mentioned that at the onset of her duties in TAIS, she was informed that the school was following the NAD curriculum. Recognizing the need for the curriculum to meet the needs of TAIS learners, she began planning updates to the school curriculum. These changes were implemented gradually to prevent shock and resistance among educators and learners. The adjustments involved the addition and removal of subjects as well as some modifications to class durations for Kinder to Grade 3, Grades 4-6, Grades 7-9, and Grades 10-12

Moving one step at a time became a practical strategy and a protective response, allowing change to happen, without overwhelming the school community. This slow progress reflects thoughtful restraint more than resistance to change and innovation.

*Theme 3: When Curriculum Work Becomes Emotional and Physical Labor.*

The responsibility of curricularists deeply affected their emotional and physical wellbeing. Their abstract feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and sadness became concrete through sleeplessness, physical illness and emotional breakdowns. Lack of experience and knowledge and adopting a curriculum designed for North American students, put a toll on the curricularists’ physical health. Administrator 2 recalled how her body reacted to the new role assigned to her. She stated, “I remember, there used to be many strands of hair on my floor. Then there was a time when I feel nervous...it’s a mixture of everything

because I'm not only planning for curriculum all the time. But every time I feel nervous, my stomach would react, I would run to the toilet. It came to points like that." She also admitted that it had become more difficult for her to communicate with her loved ones from her home country. She claimed that because of her hectic schedule, her mom sent her a message stating, "Can you please chat me sometimes? Send a message." She further explained that because she would be very tired from work, all she wanted to do was to rest as soon as she got home. It also came to a point that her family would message and she would be able to reply after a day or two. Unlike when she was just teaching, she can still communicate with them every day.

Besides the negative effect on her physical state, Administrator 2 also reiterated that she cried a lot and wished she knew more. She pointed out, "I cried a lot because I wished I knew more. Like I'm not confident at all that I'm doing the right thing. Most of the time I cry alone." On the other hand, Administrator 1 admitted that she does not feel she made a huge contribution to the school curriculum. She commented, "I don't really feel that I made a huge contribution to TAIS Curriculum. I really have no background in curriculum development."

The curricularists expressed that they cried alone, felt isolated, and struggled in maintaining personal relationships. These experiences reveal curriculum work as an emotionally demanding responsibility, particularly in contexts where support systems are limited and job expectations are high.

#### *Theme 4: Navigating Curriculum Development Amid Policy Ambiguity and External Dependence.*

The planners described the difficulty of developing a curriculum in the absence of a clear government policy for international schools in the country. As first-time curriculum planners and designers, the two administrators, along with the entire school, encountered numerous challenges in developing a suitable curriculum for TAIS within a K-12 program. These challenges included the absence of a state-mandated curriculum, limited available resources, mismatches between textbooks and learners' proficiencies, the use of Bible textbooks not authored by Adventists, and the introduction of a Senior High School curriculum.

Administrator 1 explained, "Since TAIS was only a baby at that time, there have been many things that we focused our eyes on. Sadly, developing the curriculum had not been the top priority. It was also challenging because resources were not easily available." Besides the fact that curriculum development was a top priority, Administrator 1 also admitted that "One of the disadvantages TAIS has when it comes to personnel is that it is run by missionary teachers. Teachers come and go. It is very difficult to predict whether the new ones coming have the same passion, skills, and commitment." Administrator 2 added that the absence of a state-mandated curriculum for international schools in the country made it challenging for first-time curriculum developers like themselves to create a suitable curriculum for TAIS, as they had no guidelines to follow. She further explained,

*"I visited the Ministry of Education recently and they told me that we still have to follow the number of hours per subject according to their prescription in the Ministry of Education. So, let's say in public schools they are teaching math for three hours per week, then we could not offer it in our school for less than three hours. So, we can go beyond that but not lower than that"*



**Figure 3**  
*Lesson Arrangement in a Kindergarten Textbook*

<b>Introduction</b>	
• What to Expect from Your Kindergarten .....	5
• Developmental Skills Checklist .....	7
<b>Basic Concepts and Skills</b>	
• Colors .....	10
• Shapes .....	23
• Same and Different .....	65
• Things That Go Together .....	69
• Opposites .....	77
• Sizes .....	81
• Full and Empty .....	96
• Above, Below, and Between .....	98
• Top to Bottom .....	104
• Left and Right .....	106
• Left to Right .....	108
• Capital Letters .....	110
• Writing Your Name .....	111
• Writing Your Address .....	112
• Writing Your Phone Number .....	114
<b>Reading Readiness</b>	
• Letter Recognition .....	116
• ABC Order .....	161
• Consonant and Vowel Sounds .....	168
• Rhyming .....	309
• Word Recognition .....	314
<b>Mathematics Readiness</b>	
• Before and After .....	324
• Sequencing .....	331

Another apparent challenge was the previous Bible books used. Since TAIS follows the Adventist curriculum, the Bible subject is considered a major subject. However, according to Administrator 2, “At the beginning, TAIS has these books, but they are Baptist-authored books. According to the previous principal, they bought it from the US, and that Adventist schools in the US use it. And there are certain topics that are against the doctrines of the Seventh-Day Adventists church.”

The final challenge was establishing the senior high school curriculum. Alongside the growth of TAIS, Grades 10, 11, and 12 were added gradually from 2021. With the full implementation of senior high school, the curriculum has been initialized. However, challenges remain in organizing the learners into the different strands (i.e., STEM, GAS, HUMMS, and ABM). Factors such as facilities, manpower, subjects, and scheduling must be considered. At present, the school offers a general strand where the learners study a variety of subjects encompassing specific senior high school strands.

Without the state-mandated framework, the curricularists were left to interpret policies, negotiate subject requirements, and make decisions without certainty along with limited resources, unsuitable textbooks, language barriers, and transient missionary teacher staffing. Curriculum planning and development, in this context, is less likely planning but more on navigating unfamiliar territories without a compass.

*Theme 5: Exercising Agency Without Constraint Through Faith-Informed Improvisation.* Despite ongoing challenges, the curricularists showed resilience and creativity in addressing various constraints. The school addressed and coped with the challenges in the absence of a state-mandated curriculum, limited available resources, mismatches between textbooks and learners’ proficiencies, the use of Bible textbooks not authored by Adventists, and the introduction of Senior High School curriculum by doing the following procedures and strategies.

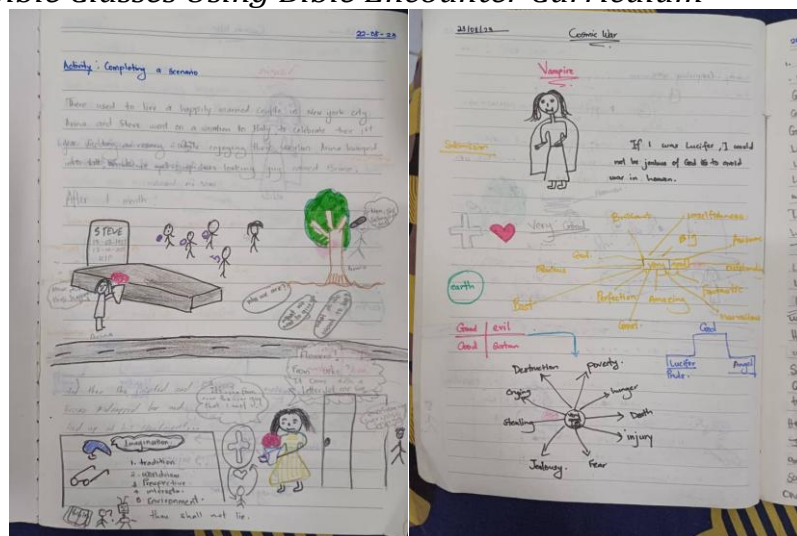
In the absence of a state-mandated curriculum for international schools, Administrator 2 confirmed that the school is allowed to conceptualize a curriculum that fits their learners best. She explained that “because we are under Timor-Leste and they don’t have a curriculum for international schools, they would still ask for a certification from a certain curriculum developer that we are actually allowed to use the curriculum.”

Since the curricularists know that locally available resources are limited, they ensure that the teachers teaching the subjects are skilled and can execute the lessons for the optimum development of the learners. Administrator 1 stated, "We are just grateful and trusting God that He would keep TAIS grow through His mercy and grace." Administrator 2 augmented that in choosing a Portuguese teacher, they would always hire a teacher whose native tongue is Portuguese. She stated, "we hire people from either Brazil or Portugal to come to teach the Portuguese subject... so we can only trust the teacher that they will teach the language properly."

For the mismatches between textbooks and learners' proficiencies, the kindergarten teacher started using the textbooks as her reference for the topics to teach while utilizing other resources and teaching strategies that are more age- and level-appropriate for her students. The Portuguese teacher also mentioned that requiring students to have a Portuguese dictionary of their own made the lessons less difficult to teach and learn.

In terms of the use of Bible textbooks not authored by Adventists, the school partnered with an Australian Adventist curricularist who also authored and developed the Bible Encounter Curriculum which provided a positive impact on the teaching and learning of the Bible subject into the schools K-12 program. Administrator 2 affirmed that the Bible curriculum's change into the "encounter curriculum which is an Adventist-authored curriculum" reinforced the integration of the Adventist beliefs and doctrines not only in Bible class but also in other subjects, programs, and activities.

Figure 4  
*Activities in Bible Classes Using Bible Encounter Curriculum*



Finally, introducing Senior High School also affected the high school programs. Scheduling, subject choices, and teachers have been an ongoing challenge on top of not having the usual senior high school strands. The school has been taking small steps to improve the senior high school curriculum. Administrator 1 exclaimed, "God is good for sending people who were able to help in creating curriculum for high school. With their concern, pathfinder and research were added." Administrator 2 agreed to this stating that "Another thing is the research...When I started here and then I taught Math Grade 5, sometimes I would like to ask them to write like an essay like five sentences or a paragraph and then they would number their sentences one to five and that's their paragraph. And so when a teacher approached me with the research, I was kind of hesitant because... oh can the students really do it? But actually, they can...with proper guidance."

Administrator 2 also shared that the inclusion of Home Economics in the high school and senior high school curriculum has been beneficial because it lessened the vacant periods of the learners while engaging them in more productive educational activities. She stated, "They have home economics and I could see even the boys who I thought were just lazy and all in class...and they become like baker...someone who does skirting...table skirting. I think those are just experiences of the kids that would give them skills like real-life skills. Something that can be useful..."

Regarding the emotional and physical toll that these curricularists experience, they are grateful for the people who help them cope with their struggles. Administrator 2 expressed her gratefulness to the current ADRA country director who happened to be her housemate. In moments when she feels like she is "the victim and I'm blaming myself because I don't know this and I don't know that. But my housemate, which is a very big help, like I always tell her that 'if you're not my housemate, probably I'm home already by now...'" She would always comfort me. Although she doesn't know how to do my job, but her presence alone is comforting... She just knows what to say. One time, I was crying in my room, and I think she heard it, and she went to my room, said something, and hugged me, and I am okay."

The curricularists relied on faith, trusted colleagues, online sources, and trial-and-error strategies to sustain the curriculum and still offer quality Adventist education. Hiring native language teachers, utilizing level-appropriate resources, and changing the Bible curriculum were implemented aiming to serve learners well, even in unideal conditions. Their actions reflect their commitment to Christlike service more than mere compliance to responsibilities.

#### *Theme 6: Perceiving Professional Growth as a Pathway to Curriculum Sustainability.*

Moving forward, the curricularists expressed their strong desire to grow professionally and be more confident and knowledgeable curriculum developers. When asked about their view of themselves in the future, Administrator 2 affirmed that she would still want to be a curriculum planner. She said, "It came to a point where I want to study curriculum development because that's what TAIS needs. I see that they need one to be able to develop a curriculum and I want to be part of that when I'm ready. With an improved version of me." She also stated that she loves mathematics and she wants learners to also love math. She mentioned, "I really love mathematics and there are so many students that still hate the subject because it doesn't make sense to them. Probably I would want to...in the future focus developing a curriculum specifically for math that is engaging and something that makes sense to the students."

Administrator 1, on the other hand, confirmed her desire to also improve in curriculum designing. She mentioned that she has been an administrator for many years and knowing more about curriculum designing will be very helpful for her. She admitted, "I'm glad I've been part of TAIS development; however, I still don't see myself knowledgeable about developing curriculum. Therefore, I don't see myself being involved in anything related to developing the curriculum. I would only be comfortable if I could really learn the whole concept of it in a school."

While they can witness and experience the improvements in the TAIS curriculum, the two administrators as well as the interviewed teachers are hopeful that TAIS will finally have an established curriculum for all levels. Administrator 1 expressed, “We are just grateful and trusting God that He would keep TAIS grow through His mercy and grace. That He would continue to send the right people for TAIS based on its needs.” On the other hand, Administrator 2 stated:

*“I hope, really, someone could develop a curriculum specifically for TAIS that would meet the needs of the students. It could be Australian...it could be US...but as long as it is contextualized to the needs of our students here, especially in Timor. I would still want the students in Timor to be patriotic to their country, and I would still want them to love their own language. So hopefully someone, God willing, if He will send someone here to develop a proper curriculum for TAIS that is only for TAIS”*

The curricularists’ future-oriented reflections recognized their present limitations while believing in the possibility of learning and improving. Rather than leaving curriculum behind, they envisioned themselves equipped to serve the Adventist education system better. This reflection of professional growth shows their commitment to the mission of Adventist education and the long-term sustainability of the school and its curriculum.

## DISCUSSION

The results revealed that TAIS has first-time curriculum planners and designers without professional backgrounds in curriculum planning and designing. Both administrators hold professional degrees in fields other than administration and curriculum design, which impacted their ability to plan and design a tailored curriculum for TAIS. Because the school’s core curriculum was designed specifically for the North American Division of Seventh-Day Adventists, contextualizing it for Asian learners is challenging. Additionally, the school is run by missionary teachers who typically stay for only a year or two, further complicating the stabilization of the school curriculum. These factors also affect the curricularists’ physical and emotional states. While Administrator 1 feels she did not contribute much to the development of the school curriculum, Administrator 2 experienced physical and emotional exhaustion leading to negative physical reactions such as hair loss and upset stomach. Furthermore, she often found herself crying due to stress.

On the other hand, the insufficient state-mandated policies and regulations for international schools in the country provide curriculum planners and designers with the flexibility to experiment with their curriculum design. However, this also presents a disadvantage, as there are no guidelines to follow, making it challenging to develop a stable and consistent curriculum.

Curriculum planning and designing is a dynamic process and a demanding task. It reflects the developers’ objectives, which are focused on achieving measurable outcomes for their school programs (Rajurkar et al., 2019). However, challenges come along with the development of stable curriculum design. For instance, in a study by Vreuls et al. (2022) among Dutch university curriculum developers, it was found that even experienced curricularists face challenges due to the context in which development takes place, as well as the various roles and responsibilities they have. The results of the current study also align with their findings, revealing that curriculum developers feel “insufficiently equipped to carry out their tasks” (p. 636).

Pinar (2022) further argues that curriculum development is not only a technical task but a praxis of presence where the curricularists consciously engaged present lived experience, institutional norms, and broader sociocultural realities in their decision-making. This praxis of presence reflects a gap between role expectations and the absence of policy guidance, amplifying the physical, emotional, and physical strain. Pinar's argument illuminates how curriculum theory describes the gravity of curriculum leadership as more biological and political than purely technical. Moreover, Deng (2021) posits that in underregulated systems, curriculum authority is often assigned due to the necessity to fill in the role; hence expertise in the role is usually sacrificed. From a critical perspective, this situation exposes how curriculum planning is shaped by ambiguous system which raises the question of legitimacy, authority, and support in curriculum governance (Priestly et al., 2021).

Congruently, many factors affect the success of educational reform through the curriculum. These factors could be (a) the nature of innovation, (b) organizational resources, and (c) an individual's readiness for change, which includes cognitive and affective components. Emotions, as argued by Ittner et al. (2019), play a crucial role in curriculum development as part of educational change contexts, as they can either encourage or hinder a person's willingness to participate in activities related to the change or to adopt the innovation itself. In the current study, the shift in roles for the administrators, based on their previous work experiences, affected their ability to effectively develop a contextualized curriculum, which also resulted in negatively affective emotional and physical aspects. Ittner et al.'s study also found that the administrators' perceived competence has a strong effect on their anxiety. This means that the less satisfaction they feel during a reform at school, whether in terms of governance or curriculum, the more anxiety they experience.

Furthermore, curriculum, according to Nurdin et al. (2023), is "a government policy in the field of education determined by the government" (p. 139). The problem in Timor-Leste is its lack of government-mandated policy for international schools. This dilemma results in non-uniform educational programs for international schools in the country. Although Timor-Leste is lenient in permitting the operations of international schools in the country, its lack of guidelines affects the development of the school curriculum.

Curriculum development is a vital element in the advancement of an educational institution. It impacts not only the administration but also the other stakeholders within the educational system. All educators play a significant part in the development and implementation of any curriculum, influencing the learners' educational opportunities. Without a tailored and contextualized curriculum, the entire learning process could be jeopardized. Hence, it is important to create a well-planned curriculum suited to each institution while adhering to the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education in any country.

This study explored the lived experiences of curriculum planners and designers at the only Seventh-day Adventist school in the entire Timor-Leste. This study demonstrated that the curricularists at TAIS face challenging experiences in developing the school curriculum. Following an American-context curriculum has been a persistent challenge for the school's first-time curriculum planners and designers, especially since they must address the specific needs of Asian learners. The fact that the school is staffed by missionary teachers who volunteer to teach for only one to two years adds a unique aspect to this study. Finally, the ambiguous guidelines from the government impact on the overall development and implementation of the curriculum at TAIS.

The reconceptualization of curriculum planning as exemplified faith-informed practice positioned within complex policy and mission contexts is the study's contribution to curriculum theory. The study also extends Adventist education scholarship by exploring and documenting infrequently examined lived experiences of Adventist curriculum planners and developers of a single school in a national context. In terms of policy, the findings highlight the challenges faced by international schools operating in underregulated and fragmented systems, accentuating the need for well-defined and solid national frameworks that still respect institutional autonomy while ensuring curricular coherence and transparency. This study further positions faith-based curriculum works as pedagogical and moral labor within global educational landscapes.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are drawn:

- The curricularists at TAIS may participate in professional development programs in curriculum and instruction, such as training, certifications, or graduate studies. This step will improve their skills and knowledge in curriculum design.
- The school curricularists may also benchmark various international schools within Asia while maintaining the distinctiveness of the Adventist curriculum. This step can assist them in developing a more contextualized curriculum tailored to the needs of their learners.
- The school may refurbish its worker's policy handbook to include specifications for tenure. This could encourage missionary teachers to strive for regularization which may positively affect their teaching performance.
- International schools in Timor-Leste may collaborate to create an organization to build networks and linkages. This step may help in establishing curriculum guidelines for international schools.
- The Ministry of Education may provide specific guidelines for international and private schools in the country, similar to the attention given to government schools. This approach will broaden educators' perspectives on diversified opportunities in both public and private schools.
- Future researchers may examine curriculum dissemination and enactment across TAIS branches to explore how localized adaptations emerged. Likewise, comparative studies involving other faith-based or international schools in similar policy contexts within the country may further highlight how curriculum planners negotiate identity, policy, and sustainability across national settings.

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