

Working with Curriculum Standards to Build a Community of Readers in a Culture of Non-Readers

by Becky M. Kirschner

From Goals 2000, to curriculum standards, to ESEA 2001: legislators, policymakers, business leaders, and educators have proposed that standards-based reforms and increased accountability will provide every student with a quality education (Cavazos 2002) and an opportunity to reach high standards for learning (Riley 2002), as well as to close the achievement gap for poor and minority students (Riley 2002; Cavazos 2002; Paige 2002). Others have argued that curriculum standards will improve teaching and learning by clearly articulating what knowledge and skills students must have and by implying what instructional practices teachers should use to help students learn (Cohen 1996; Darling-Hammond 1997). They contend that using criterion-referenced tests can improve teaching and learning by giving teachers feedback on student achievement and the information they need to assess the effectiveness of their instructional practices (Ogawa et al. 2003).

Critics of standards, however, have argued that mandated standards-based reform and more extensive standardized testing can harm student learning (Falk 2002); encourage teachers to use instructional practices that promote minimal student proficiency (McNeil 1986); and promote a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum, increased testing, ability tracking, and retention and promotion decisions based on a single test result (Falk 2002). Such practices can exacerbate inequities among students from different backgrounds and undermine effective teaching (Darling-Hammond and Falk 1997).

Despite such concerns, recent studies show that opportunities for reflection and collaboration arise when teachers work collaboratively with “worthy” standards that “encourage students to pose and solve problems,” “deal with significant issues,” and “consider how children learn”—standards “broad enough to focus on essentials rather than on

countless bits of information students must memorize” (Falk 2002, p. 613). Such opportunities reveal teachers’ deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning and strengthen their professionalism by helping them clarify their goals and expectations. Through collaborative work, they can develop shared meanings and deeper understandings of how their students learn (Falk 2002).

As part of a larger project in a small rural district with a diverse population and numerous at-risk students, the author collaborated with five language arts teachers to write a middle school curriculum aligned with the Michigan Curriculum Framework (MCF) Standards and Draft Benchmarks for the English Language Arts. This paper describes how working with curriculum standards changed and enhanced teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, and practice. The report details how the effort helped the teachers establish a literacy program for all students, including those at risk. Collaborative inquiry between the teachers and the researcher fostered a two-year process of interpreting the standards, writing a language arts curriculum aligned with the MCF standards, implementing the curriculum, and evaluating its impact on student achievement.

State Curriculum Standards-based Reform

In the early 1980s, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) revised its policies on reading instruction. A new transactional definition of reading shifted the emphasis from discrete reading skills to comprehension and set out objectives consistent with that new definition. Policymakers also revised the state’s reading-evaluation instruments, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP), to reflect the new emphasis on comprehension (Spillane 1998). In the early 1990s, responding to the national standards movement, the department developed the MCF as a guide for districts and teachers developing local curriculum. The MCF consisted of six sections: an introduction; content standards and draft benchmarks for the core-content areas; planning; teaching and learning; assessment; and professional development.

The Standards and Draft Benchmarks for the English Language Arts parallel the National Standards for the English Arts developed by the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association. The twelve standards include three to eight benchmarks per standard, for a total of thirty-eight benchmarks. According to the MCF, the benchmarks indicate “student expectations at various developmental levels including elementary, middle school, and high school” (Michigan Curriculum Framework [MCF] 1996, p. 1).

The Middle School Literacy Curriculum

When the collaborative partnership began, the literacy program at the middle school consisted of a course in reading and a course in English. In response to low MEAP scores in the late 1990s, the district had adopted a scripted, direct-instruction (DI) program for all K–8 students. Educational specialists from the intermediate school district had trained teachers and paraprofessionals to administer the program, which focused on hierarchically arranged, discrete reading skills and progressed from decoding to comprehension. The specialists had also supplied teachers and administrators with the rationale and research for including “at-risk” and “minority” students in the program. Originally, dividing the language arts into reading and English courses for grades six through eight provided the time needed to administer the scripted reading lessons. The current principal had dropped eighth-grade DI and combined reading and English into one course in order to add a health class to the schedule.

From 1989 to 2001, less than 50 percent of seventh-graders had ever achieved proficiency on the MEAP. The year in which the larger project began, the state slated the school for Targeted Assistance and Guidance because of low MEAP scores in math and reading. In addition, a Title I audit found the school out of compliance, citing use of paraprofessionals and the lack of curricula aligned with state standards and benchmarks as the most glaring deficits. A district directive to write a curriculum aligned with the MCF Standards and Benchmarks motivated teachers to examine their current practices and acquaint themselves with the state standards. As the findings show, the teachers’ scrutiny of curriculum standards changed and expanded their beliefs, knowledge, and practice.

Working with Curriculum-based Standards

Working with the state curriculum standards and benchmarks initiated conversations among reading and English teachers and their university partner and gave teachers the opportunity to articulate their beliefs and knowledge about their current practice and curriculum.

During the second year of the larger project, the researcher began working with five language arts teachers at a middle school. At the suggestion that the reading teachers and the English teachers work together on writing the language arts curriculum, the reading teachers protested that their curriculum was not only separate from the English curriculum but already aligned with the MCF’s English language arts standards and benchmarks.

Over the next several weeks, there were separate meetings with the reading and English teachers concerning the DI reading program. The

reading teachers seemed sure that the hierarchically arranged DI program was what their students needed, and they supported their beliefs and practices by citing research. While noting the progress they had seen in individual students, they conceded that too many students were still in the decoding phase of the program and that MEAP scores were unsatisfactory. They said, however, that the consultants had told them that student performance would improve when all teachers were “doing the program right.”

The English teachers, however, expressed concern that so many students were still in the decoding phase. They noted that students did not like to read, were not reading literature or doing the kind of reading that would help prepare them for the MEAP, and were not using the library. All in all, the English teachers did not believe the current reading program supported the development of lifelong readers.

Working with an analysis of their students' MEAP results gave the reading and English teachers a clearer understanding of how their students compared with other students in the state and of the knowledge their students needed to demonstrate proficiency on the state standards-based assessment. The conversations about the data also raised questions about how well their current curriculum nurtured their students' literacy learning.

Early in the school year, an MDE representative showed the district's teachers how to interpret and use the MEAP results. The percentage of students proficient on the reading portion of the seventh-grade language arts MEAP had fluctuated from year to year: 28 in 1998, 40 in 1999, 21 in 2000, and 42 in 2001. Those rates averaged 19 percent below the state average.

A closer analysis of the items on the reading test challenged the idea that “done correctly,” the DI program would improve reading scores. The teachers discovered that the test focused on comprehension, not on discrete decoding skills. The test assessed three levels of comprehension: a) *intersentence*, the ability to focus attention on two or three contiguous sentences of the text; b) *text*, the ability to draw information from larger sections of the whole text; and c) *beyond text*, the ability to draw upon personal experience and to integrate it with concepts in the text. Students had scored lowest on the b) and c) items. Because most students had not moved out of decoding or were still in the lower level of comprehension, they had not been taught such higher-order comprehension skills.

This information challenged the reading teachers' hopes that the existing program “done right” could prepare all students to demonstrate reading proficiency on the MEAP.

Working with the MCF helped the teachers clarify their thinking about teaching and learning and prepared them to interpret the curriculum standards and benchmarks.

To learn more about the theory of teaching and learning on which the MCF was based, the teachers and the researcher examined the section on teaching and learning that outlined what form teaching and learning should take in the classroom. Stepping out of the immediate context of their own teaching, the teachers drew on their professional knowledge to interpret the four standards of authentic teaching and learning (higher-order thinking, deep knowledge, substantive conversation, and connections beyond the classroom), and illustrations of how to integrate the core-content standards into units that embody the core-content areas. The teachers discussed Bloom's taxonomy and drew on knowledge they had developed from using the Great Books series. One English teacher, who was enrolled in an educational psychology class, shared what she was studying about current theories of learning. The teachers applied such concepts to construct a shared understanding of the theory of learning with roots in authentic standards of instruction.

Examining the MEAP data led the teachers to question whether the current reading program taught the higher-order thinking skills that the students needed. Now the teachers began to question whether they were teaching deep knowledge, engaging their students in substantive conversation, or doing enough to make connections to the students' lives. With those questions in mind, and working with a clearer understanding of the MCF's theory of teaching and learning, the participants turned to the Content Standards and Draft Benchmarks.

Working with the Content Standards and Draft Benchmarks for the English Language Arts changed and expanded the teachers' beliefs and knowledge about the teaching and learning of literacy and about their own instructional practices.

Rather than interpret the standards and benchmarks to identify gaps between their programs and the benchmarks, as they had done before, the teachers analyzed each standard and benchmark with an eye toward writing a curriculum that was theoretically and instructionally aligned with the MCF. Looking at the introduction to the content standards, they were relieved to learn that the standards and benchmarks did not themselves constitute a state curriculum. Rather, the creators of the standards intended them as guides for local districts to use in developing their own curricula and to serve as indicators of student expectations to determine how well students were learning.

Next, reviewing the Vision Statement for the English Language Arts revealed that they were defined as "a vehicle for communication" and

that they encompassed both processes and content. The processes included listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing; content included “ideas, themes, issues, problems and conflicts found in classical and contemporary literature and other texts” (MCF, Section II, p. 3). According to the vision statement, “The ultimate goal for all English language arts learners is personal, social, occupational, and civic literacy” (MCF, Section II, p. 3).

The Overview of the English Language Arts Content Standards stated that in a locally developed language arts curriculum, instruction, and assessment should reflect the integration of the five areas (speaking, listening, reading, writing, and viewing); instruction should focus on common human experiences embodied in literature and oral texts; processes and content should be integrated; and knowledge, skills, and strategies should be integrated across the curriculum. Conversations about those ideas provided participants additional opportunities to articulate, debate, and clarify beliefs and knowledge about literacy teaching and learning as well as to expand understanding of what a curriculum aligned with the MCF would encompass. Once again, the new understandings of the underlying theory and goals of the MCF challenged old beliefs and raised new questions. How was it possible to develop a curriculum that integrated the five areas of literacy when reading and English were separate courses? How was it possible to expand the current curriculum to include literature when the curriculum was already full? With new understandings and questions in mind, participants in the review began a detailed study of the standards and draft benchmarks for English and language arts.

For the next three months, participants discussed each standard and benchmark to identify the underlying assumptions, reach consensus on its meaning, and restate the benchmarks in their own words. To establish learning objectives for each benchmark, the teachers and the researcher separated process and content and developed specific teaching and learning objectives for each process and content concept. Next they looked across the documents they had created and developed a chart showing which of the five areas of the language arts each benchmark focused upon and which processes and context each addressed.

The participants then developed a document that articulated their shared understanding of the key components of an English language arts curriculum. The document listed components of the English language arts program; underlying assumptions of the MCF; the theory of authentic instruction; underlying assumptions of the English language arts standards and benchmarks; a theory of the language arts and of instruction in language arts; benchmarks focused primarily on process; and benchmarks

focused primarily on content. From this document, they established a format for developing the scope and sequence.

With this format in hand, they turned their attention to writing the curriculum. The teachers had changed their thinking about the DI program, but the district mandated that they use it. Could they supplement the program to better address the MCF? Could they possibly integrate literature, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing into a scripted reading program? They began to explore how they might address these issues.

At the end of March, the reading teachers were confronted with a new issue. The principal told them that the DI reading program in the middle school would be discontinued. Paraprofessionals would no longer work exclusively with students in reading but had to support student learning in all content areas. The reading teachers were now concerned that they would need to develop an entirely new reading curriculum. With support from the English teachers and the researcher, the reading teachers gradually came to realize that now they could write a literacy curriculum that could accelerate the learning of all students, including those at risk, and could at the same time address the guidelines of the MCF.

Working with the MCF helped the teachers develop the knowledge and professionalism they needed to write a curriculum aligned with MCF standards and benchmarks for the English and language arts.

During spring break, one of the reading teachers contacted publishers to ask for samples of texts. After the break, the teachers jointly assessed the new materials. Using the documents they had developed and the knowledge obtained while working with benchmarks and standards, the teachers selected a literature-based program arranged in thematic units that integrated the five language arts, focused on process and content, and aligned with the MCF standards and benchmarks for English and language arts.

In mid-April, the teachers began writing a language arts curriculum that addressed the needs of students at their grade level. The sixth-grade reading and English teachers used the program materials as a resource to write thematic units that integrated the five areas of language arts and coordinated assignments in English with assignments in reading. The seventh-grade teachers also coordinated reading and English by developing assignments in English that built on what the students were reading and learning in their reading class. The eighth-grade English teacher used the program materials as a resource to supplement and expand what she had been doing in her class. The teachers worked together to coordinate the teaching of processes and content and to develop approaches for documenting student achievement.

At the same time the teachers were writing their curricula, they also developed a rationale for adopting the new texts. The collaboratively developed document showed just how much the teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and ideas about practice had changed and how confident they had become in their own professionalism. The document included five key points that outlined how the existing program failed to address the MCF standards and benchmarks and presented a rationale for selecting a literature-based program with an instructional focus on comprehension. The district curriculum committee accepted the teachers' request to pilot the new program for a year and asked them to share their findings with the district on a regular basis.

Implementing the new curriculum changed the teachers' practice and increased students' attitudes and achievement in language arts.

The teachers changed the physical arrangement of their classrooms, their grouping patterns, and their instructional practices. They developed assessments that would track each student's learning of processes and contents, attended conferences and workshops to learn more about strategies that would engage students in reading, called on the publisher's consultant to conduct workshops for them, and used the researcher to help them assess their teaching. In January, the seventh-grade reading teacher and the eighth-grade English teacher introduced their students to sustained silent reading, and in April the seventh-grade reading teacher introduced literature circles.

All teachers reported that student attitudes toward reading had improved dramatically. The seventh-graders read more than 600 books between January and March. The sixth- and seventh-grade reading teachers found that students who had been low-performing in the DI program were making connections between reading and English and drawing on literature to express themselves in writing and speaking. The eighth-grade students checked out so many books from the library that the librarian had to purchase more books—some recommended by the students. The content teachers jokingly complained that students were reading library books in their classes. Teachers also noted that students were internalizing the reading process and content. When one teacher began class by asking the students to read a selection, some students complained that she had “forgotten to activate their background knowledge.”

Student proficiency in reading also improved. The percentage of sixth-grade students reading at or above grade level increased from 57 at the beginning of the year to 72 by the end of the year. In the seventh grade the corresponding increase was from 59 percent to 68 percent. With only half a year in the new program, 48 percent of seventh-graders

were assessed “proficient” on the seventh-grade reading MEAP, compared to the previous year’s 38 percent.

Conclusion

Although the teachers had hoped to see greater improvement in the MEAP scores, they were pleased with the day-to-day progress of their students, especially those at risk. The teachers looked at their students and saw readers and writers where they had once seen students who showed little interest in literacy. The students had progressed from hating to read to loving to read. Working with curriculum-based standards had helped the teachers write a curriculum that has transformed a culture of nonreaders into a community of readers.

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