Thomas-Fair, U. (2008). Perceptions of curriculum and inservice teachers: An action research project. *Wisdom of Practice: An Online Journal of Action Research.*

Perceptions of Curriculum and Inservice Teachers: An Action Research Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how inservice teacher's beliefs might be altered by increased familiarity with their state's standards-based curriculum and how it might be evaluated in their schools and school systems. Action research was undertaken to examine the attitudes of ten inservice teachers, who were enrolled in a graduate curriculum theory course in summer 2007, regarding Georgia's standards-based curriculum and the processes of its development and implementation. Exposed to the curriculum and standards adoption process, teachers became aware of the levels of decision-making involved in standards-setting and statewide curriculum implementation. Analysis of the teachers' experiences and perspectives indicated that they ultimately felt the state standards-based curriculum was "dropped in their laps."

Introduction

In March 2004, the State Board of Education accepted a recommendation from the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) to eliminate the K-3 English/Language Arts standards, "Reading and Writing Grade by Grade," from the proposed Georgia Performance Standards. Although many teachers approved the proposed performance standards, they indicated they preferred standards that could be changed or augmented in coming years as the needs of Georgia's students changed and more effective teaching strategies emerged. Teachers expressed other frustrations, including the following recorded in a kindergarten grade level meeting during the 2004 rollout of the Georgia Performance Standards:

> This is another grade level planning meeting. Isn't this our second training this month? Are we supposed to not post the QCC's [Quality Core Curriculum] in our classroom for every lesson and activity? Do we have to post a QCC for the mandated reading reform program too? New standards? How are they rolling these out? The curriculum specialists are not in my classroom everyday. How do we fit everyday math in with the instructional time mandates for the district? How do we classify circle time with the new performance standards? How do they want us to correlate kindergarten and first grade performance standards?

So, do we just get rid of the QCC's? Kindergarten is developmental. They should just leave us alone! (kindergarten teacher, personal communication, March 3, 2005)

This research was undertaken to study the perspectives and experiences of eleven teachers regarding state-required changes centered on the concept of curriculum.

Review of Literature

What is curriculum? Armstrong (2003) defines curriculum simply as what is to be taught, a filtering mechanism which allows some content to be included in instructional programs and other content to be eliminated. Others define curriculum based on power and perception – the *hidden curriculum*. Yet others define curriculum as *intended curriculum*, what students should learn (e.g., content state standards); *enacted curriculum*, what teachers teach; and *assessed curriculum,* what students actually learn according to state and other assessments (Blank & Hill, 2004).

Curriculum Development and Evaluation

Curriculum development may involve alignment with state standards and assessments, articulation across grade levels, identification of professional development needs, consideration of the cognitive level of instructions, coverage of standards in textbooks and other instructional materials, the match with local assessments, and opportunities for collaboration among teachers and instructional leaders. Three models for evaluating curricula, to be discussed next, are to be found in the literature.

The CIPP model. CIPP is an acronym for Context, Input, Process and Product (Stufflebeam, Foley, Gephart, Hammond, Merriman, 1971). The CIPP model of evaluation was created by Daniel Stufflebeam and contemporaries in the 1960s. This evaluation model necessitates the evaluation of context, input, process, and product in critiquing a program's value. CIPP is a decision-focused method of evaluation and emphasizes the systematic terms of information for program management and operation. The CIPP framework was developed as a means of linking evaluation with program decision-making. It aims to provide a logical and rational basis for program decision-making, established on a cycle of planning, structuring, implementing and reviewing and revising decisions, each examined through a different aspect of evaluation – context, input, process, and product evaluation. Stufflebeam viewed evaluation in terms of the types of decisions it served and categorized it according to its functional role within a system of planned social change.

In this approach, information is seen as most valuable when it helps program managers to make better decisions, so evaluation activities should be planned to coordinate with the decision needs of program staff. Data collection and reporting are then undertaken in order to sponsor more efficient program management. Since programs change as they are implemented, decision-makers needs will change so the evaluation activities have to adjust to meet these changing needs as well as guaranteeing continuity of focus where suitable in order to trace development and performance over time.

The CIPP model is an effort to make evaluation directly pertinent to the needs of decision-makers during the various phases and actions of a program. In the CIPP approach, in order for an evaluation to be useful, it must address those questions which key decision-makers are asking, and must address the questions in ways and verbal communication that decision-makers will easily understand. The approach aims to engage the decision-makers in the evaluation planning process as a way of increasing the

likelihood of the evaluation findings having significance and being used. Stufflebeam thought that evaluation should be a process of delineating, obtaining and providing constructive information to decision-makers, with the inclusive goal of program or project improvement.

The CBAM model. From research work in the late 1960's and early 1970's, Hall and Hord (1987) recognized, confirmed, and operationally defined eight different levels of use of an innovative approach to evaluation. These levels of use are an important feature of their Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). When learning to use an innovation, users travel along a spectrum that extends from no use to full use.

- Non-use - State in which the user has little or no knowledge of the innovative approach to evaluation, no connection with the innovation, and is doing nothing toward becoming involved.
- Orientation - State in which the user has recently acquired or is acquiring information about the innovative approach to evaluation and/or has recently explored or is exploring its value orientation and its demands upon user and user system.
- Preparation - State in which the user is preparing for the first use of the innovative approach to evaluation.
- Mechanical Use - State in which the user focuses most effort on the short-term, day-to-day use of the innovative approach to evaluation with little time for reflection. Changes in use are made more to meet user needs than client needs. The user is principally engaged in a stepwise attempt to master the tasks required to use the innovation, often resulting in incoherent and artificial use.
- Routine Use - Use of the innovative approach to evaluation becomes constant. Few if any changes are being made in ongoing use. Little preparation or thought is being given to improving innovation use or its consequences.
- Refinement - State in which the user varies the use of the innovative approach to evaluation to increase the impact on clients within immediate sphere of influence. Variations are based on knowledge of both short- and long-term consequences for clients.
- Integration - State in which the user is combining own efforts to use the innovative approach to evaluation with related activities of colleagues to achieve a collective impact on clients within their common sphere of influence.
- Renewal - State in which the user re-evaluates the quality of use of the innovative approach to evaluation, seeks key modifications of or options to present innovation to attain increased impact on clients, scrutinizes new developments in the field, and discovers new goals for self and the organization.

Checklists. Scriven (1991) basically states that checklists, although apparently simple, can be tools with major impact. They can be as complex as the evaluation process dictates. Checklists also call for assumptions to be identified or challenged. Scriven provides the functions of various types of checklists: *laundry list*, *strongly sequential checklist, weakly sequential checklist, iterative checklist, diagnostic checklist, criteria of merit checklist (COMlist).*

A *laundry list* is basically a mnemonic device and used for just that. One can start by including as many items as needed. A *strongly sequential list* is the kind of list where sequencing of checkpoints is involved. It includes requirements and prerequisites for certain actions to take place. This checklist often represents inference chains that involve extensive conditionals. A flow chart may be an example of this checklist. A *weakly sequential* checklist is one where the arrangement is of some importance, but for mental or effectiveness reasons rather than from logical or bodily necessity. An *iterative checklist* is chronological, in whole or part, but requires —or may require—multiple passes in order to reach a firm reading on each checkpoint or benchmark.

The *diagnostic checklist* typically supports a classified sort of conclusion which may be explanatory, not evaluative. The checklist is

unambiguously evaluative, often a trouble-shooting list where conclusions are necessarily critical and therefore evaluative. Almost certainly the most important type of checklist for evaluation principles is the *criteria of merit checklist* (*COMlist*) often used for teaching evaluations. *COMlists* are commonly used as the starting point for a particular scoring formula: the criteria are given weights (e.g., on a 1-5 scale), the candidates are given performance scores on a standard scale (e.g., 1-10), and the sum of the products of the weights (of each criterion by the performance on that dimension) for each candidate is used as the measure of merit.

Including the definitions or descriptors of items in the checklist is important because instruments employed in this type study are based on the principles of the checklists aforementioned. CIPP and CBAM were important in this study because these models were a part of the curriculum theory on which the states' standards-based curriculum was developed and adopted. Who are the parties that activate these models through use? Stakeholders. Let us examine their roles.

Policy

To identify whether the philosophical and theoretical bases of curriculum reforms were related to outcomes-based or standards-based education, Watt (2006) examined national and state policy and curriculum documents, finding that the principles behind underlying national policy statements were outcome-based. Subsequently, beginning in 2003, outcome-based education became the predominant underpinning for the curriculum frameworks developed by the states and territories. However, while curriculum developers gave better consideration to clear and measurable outcomes, the lack of a strong tradition of independent evaluation of these documents made it difficult to ascertain their quality.

Stakeholders

Students. Good curriculum is a stimulus. It should act as a raw material in the context of student's experiences. Gentilucci (2004) found a relationship among curriculum policy, learning, and students. First, research data argue that effective reform and improvement efforts must take into consideration students' perspectives on schooling and learning. Second, research argues against the notion that elementary students learn poorly simply because learning does not matter to them. Finally, research questions blaming poor learning on factors outside of school. While issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and poverty indisputably influence students' ability to learn well, the original causes of poor learning are described as originating within the classroom. Gentilucci's study suggests that a few classroom variables related to curriculum, instruction, teacher behavior, and collective learning hold the key to improving learning in the elementary school.

Teachers. Ben-Peretz (1990) states that, as enactors of the curriculum, teachers modify, interpret, augment, and choose selectively from materials available to them. In examining the effectiveness of professional development regarding standards-based curriculum, Snow-Renner and Lauer (2005) found that standards-based professional development can have an affirmative effect on classroom practice, predominantly in terms of reform-oriented practices. While it can also have an affirmative effect on student achievement, the researchers found a mixed relationship between standards-based professional development and student success. However, examination of high-quality professional development (e.g., sustained period and focus on content, active learning, consistency) revealed a delicate positive relationship, depending on the achievement gauge.

Administrators. Ruebling, Stow, Kayona, & Clarke (2004), investigating curriculum and leadership through the lens of student achievement, found that leaders needed to coordinate opportunities for teachers to work in teams, focus resources efficiently on

implementing the curriculum, and institute accountability for results. However, their results suggested that school leaders were unsuccessful in accomplishing four critical outcomes of curriculum development: (1) constructing well-written documents that use a general framework; (2) linking curriculum to state and national standards; (3) raising awareness and teaching of the curriculum by teachers; and (4) ensuring that all students effectively learning the curriculum. These researchers also found that, to accomplish school improvement, school leaders must help teachers and parents think beyond the strategies of reduced class size and traditional schools organized around one teacher in each classroom and many specialist teachers.

Trubowitz (2005), in a study involving college faculty and school administrators working with teachers in their classrooms, found that when teachers, administrators, and content area faculty are put in neutral settings in reference to curriculum development and professional development, barriers between people eroded. Trubowitz also observed that, when administrators, teachers, professors, and parents met to discuss educational matters, they interacted not as figures occupying particular roles but as individuals with views to offer.

Using what was learned from the literature, this study focused on examining inservice teachers' understandings about how standards-based curricula are adopted and enacted, and their growth in capacity as a result of evaluating the standards-based curriculum in their schools and school systems.

Research Methods

Participants. The ten teachers who participated in this study had taught from two to eleven years in metropolitan school districts in the southeastern United States. All ten were currently teaching using the Georgia Performance Standards. The instructor, also the researcher, was treated as a participant as her reflections were included in discussions.

Data collection. Data were collected using surveys (see Appendix A) and analysis of documents, specifically the inservice teachers' curriculum analysis projects and standards-based curriculum design projects.

The Curriculum Analysis Project (CAP) involved a yes/no checklist with twenty-two questions related to curriculum and an open-ended comments section. This instrument's eight categories included: (1) reviewing your curriculum plan; (2) reviewing textbooks, other written curriculum materials, or kit materials for content; (3) reviewing textbooks, other written curriculum materials, or kit materials for processes and inquiry (4) how computer technology is used for the curriculum; (5) how curriculum resources are acquired; (6) training or professional development; (7) ethnic learning styles of students; and (8) multiculturalism in curriculum.

The standards-based Curriculum Design Project (CDP) involved a curriculum development instrument, a rubric with five categories and three to five criteria per category, to be used to create a standards-based curriculum and to evaluate it. The categories included: (1) curriculum (required) standards, (2) lesson, (3) materials, (4) key questions, and (5) assessment. A Curriculum Questionnaire, adapted from the Singapore National Curriculum Framework Document, contained thirty questions in eight categories: (1) teacher background; (2) Georgia Performance Standards-Based Curriculum Framework, curriculum statements, and curriculum integration; (3) reporting of achievement progress based on assessments; (4) implementation manageability; (5) varying impacts; (6) curriculum support /resources; (7) diversity; and (8) effective practice examples. Items with a five-point Likert scale, responses ranging from *very useful* to *do not know*, were offered along with open-ended questions.

Data analysis. Survey results were analyzed for patterns of responses, which were categorized and interpreted. Student projects, the CAP and CDP, were content analyzed for relevance to state content standards and to the criteria indicated above.

Results

CAP Results

Upon analyzing the data from the Curriculum Analysis Project (CAP), the researcher found the greatest significance in the categories of technology and multiculturalism, where participants reported deficiencies in state curricula in such comments as:

Neither state requires the use of technology.

For each state, there are no sections in the curriculum that address multiculturalism.

Neither state requires the use of technology standards.

Neither requires the internet or computers for the curriculum.

The participants also noticed a significant lack of consistency in the format of the standards in reference to the identification of explicit benchmarks. Some of what the participants found was more positive. For example, they found that Indiana's social science curriculum for fifth grade included technology standards as an explicit part of the curriculum and directly addressed standards reflecting inclusiveness and ethnic culture.

CDP Results

The Curriculum Development Project (CDP) proved to be a challenging and very process-oriented assignment for the ten participants. This project was specifically designed to do three things: (1) explore components of curriculum, (2) create a context for curriculum evaluation and adoption, and (3) explore the role of teaming in curriculum work. Upon analyzing the data from the CDP instrument, the researcher found significant interest in the areas of benchmarks, staff development, and collaboration, for example:

Group 1 – When evaluating this group's standards-based pre-kindergarten math curriculum, the teachers articulated a succinct philosophy, clear overarching goals, and a concept map. They described their curriculum as featuring an open-ended design.

Group 2 – This group's standards-based fifth-grade geography curriculum, as indicated by the rubric, was very process-oriented and hands-on, utilizing real-life systems. It was described as a fusion design.

Group 3 – This group's standards-based multi-level social sciences curriculum, utilizing multimedia and technology, took a purposeful focus on the scope and sequence. The curriculum design was vertical and horizontal, featuring content integration and benchmarks in unit and lesson designs. The teachers noted that the comparison of standards by grade level aided dialogue in designing the curriculum and units.

Group 4 – A standards-based curriculum on the conventions of writing and language, this group's curriculum project focused on

appropriate assessments and supplemental materials and contained rubrics and a sample implementation calendar. The scope and sequence were tightly linked to fourth- and fifth-grade standards in a non-sequential design.

Group 3's was the most challenging of these projects because the group worked across three grade levels within the same set of standards. This group truly had to communicate within the framework of the state standards to keep the language and expectations consistent. This group also solicited the assistance of an outside facilitator to guide decisions about continuity from unit to unit to maintain internal consistency.

All of the projects included school-to-career connections, information technology, as well as staff development opportunities. The staff development component was an area of noticeable variations among projects regarding duration, consistency, and selection; none included self-selection for staff development training or choices in sessions.

Survey Results

Upon analyzing the data from the questionnaire, significant patterns emerged in five categories: (1) Georgia performance standards-based curriculum framework; (2) statements and documents; (3) curriculum integration; (4) assessment, achievement progress reporting, and review; and (5) curriculum support and resources. Regarding the Georgia performance standards-based (GPSB) curriculum framework, the majority of the participants stated that GPSB documents were *very important* in their school's planning, the majority reporting that the GPSB provided an overarching view of the curriculum. They all also reported that GPSB provided a direction for preparing students to live and work in the twenty-first century. Commenting on their own teaching, participants shared that, due to the way standards are taught, they don't have time to re-teach for maximum impact on achievement. Although the majority noted flexibility in the curriculum, they also reported that parents and schools have *some* to *little influence* on what they teach.

Statements and documents. The majority of the teachers reported that they were not sure about their own abilities to rate their own content knowledge of the curriculum statements they teach from. Most found the statements and documents to be *somewhat useful* in the areas of classroom planning and developing specific learning outcomes and *very useful* to *sometimes useful* in the areas of student progress, communication, student achievement within the school, and consistent understanding of curriculum levels within the school. They also reported that teaching based on curriculum statements had helped students by clearly defining learning outcomes.

However, more than half of the participants reported that it was sometimes difficult to teach from the curriculum statements mandated in all content areas, except technology. Also, for using curriculum documents to report student achievements or to meet the needs of minority and special needs students, the majority of the participants reported that standards-based curriculum documents were *not as useful* or *not useful at all*, having no direct use in their teaching. Rather, most reported that their schools' self-reviews were the most influential in the process of changing their teaching.

Curriculum integration. Participants reported that the most integration occurring in classrooms was in the content area of social science and the least in the arts and health/physical education.

Assessment, achievement progress reporting, and review. A majority of the teachers reported that new curriculum requirements had moderate impact on assessment and reporting, as it had on administration and planning. All participants reported that professional

development was the factor which had most influenced their assessment practices in the last few years, while state curriculum changes had not influenced how they report student progress to parents and caregivers.

Curriculum support and resources. The participants reported that other teachers and research findings were instrumental in effective teaching. All reported that much more professional development would be needed for effective teaching of the new standards-based curriculum, prioritizing the following needs: differentiating instruction, teaching reading, focusing on change, providing for ELL/ESL and special needs students, integrating content, using multiple forms of assessment, engaging in discourse through professional organizations, exploring researched-based strategies. The majority of participants reported that the most effective professional development would target a teacher's specific need.

Findings

Two important findings were gained from this research. First, as the ten participating teachers deepened their familiarity with their state's standards-based curriculum, their perspectives and attitudes toward it became more complex and their ability to articulate their positions and rationales improved markedly. At the end of the study, participants felt empowered to a significant degree because they better understood the standards adoption process, whether they agreed with it or not.

Factors influencing these results were four-fold. First, the participants capitalized on their opportunity to explore the particulars and consequences of curriculum development. Second, they also took the opportunity to explore the purpose of curriculum documents and their criteria. Third, they benefited from opportunity to examine how standards manifest themselves in curriculum documents. Lastly, using curriculum evaluation models and their own teaching experiences for context, they developed new capacities by sorting and synthesizing curricula and the intended effects on learners.

In a second finding, collaboration and instructor facilitation enhanced the teachers' gains in understanding and skill. The true power of this study came from the participants' conversations during the Curriculum Analysis Project and the Curriculum Development Project. An example of this would be how, working together to compare standards among states, the teachers found that benchmarks could be be problematic because some states had not included them at all and because of semantics, some states calling them indicators. They also learned how concerns about the curriculum influenced implementation of the standards. This manifested itself in collaborative work during the curriculum analysis and development projects and during critique of the curriculum adoption frameworks.

Conclusion

The power of action research lies in examination of the consequences of changes in coursework. In this case, that power resulted in benefits to the instructor as well as to the teacher-participants, providing a platform for better informed teaching by everyone. For the instructor, reflections on the teachers’ ongoing learning experiences, especially their reflective conversations, guided instruction. The instructor's reflective questioning during class discussions and projects took advantage of opportunities to improve the depth and relevance of the course, as did allowing the teachers to experience the theoretical perspectives in the curriculum evaluation models. Thus, the reflection piece of this action research was cyclic and the benefits mutual.

Authentic tasks, authentic reflection, and opportunities for reciprocal teaching were enhanced by a prior connection. Because the instructor had taught in two of the school districts in which several of the teacher-participants currently teaching, relationships

elevated communal discussion to a collegial level. This laid the groundwork for deep, collaborative thinking.

This research suggests the importance of offering teachers more avenues to unpack standards, to recognize and consider curriculum issues, and to engage in proactive dialogue with colleagues as a way of consensus-based decision-making. The challenge accepted by this instructor-researcher is to continue to create opportunities for plurality in the dialogue of learning and teaching.

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Appendix A