

Yellow Brick Roads and Emerald Cities: The Illusion of Intended Curricula in Education

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The music played, the munchkins sang, and the good witch of the north smiled and advised Dorothy to “Follow the yellow brick road... follow the yellow brick road,” if she wanted to find her way home. Her advice sounded easy enough to follow, but Dorothy found her path full of surprises of all sorts. Much like Dorothy, educators find themselves on a similar journey, looking for the best way to support their students’ learning. However, educators’ quests lead them down a road that is paved with curricula rather than yellow bricks. In an era marked by increasing accountability, many government officials, business leaders, administrators, and even educational researchers promote “scientifically based” curriculum materials as *the* means of getting students from here (wherever they are) to there (wherever our standards say they should be). Today, these discussions of appropriate curricula take place in both P-12 public school settings and institutes of higher education as the efficacy of teacher education programs have been called into question.

Standards, textbooks, and curriculum maps tend to lay out the intended curriculum beautifully; they are designed by experts to provide a means of guiding educators through the instructional process. However, this intended curriculum often changes on its way to the classroom because of numerous challenges and complexities in our educational system. Like Dorothy on her way to the Emerald City, educators at all levels find their paths fraught with obstacles. While Dorothy struggled against poppies and flying monkeys, teachers face limited funding, limited resources, large class sizes, unmotivated students, administrative mandates, and even, in some cases, their own knowledge gaps. These factors, and others, impact the intended curriculum, transforming it into what is often termed the implemented curriculum— that which teachers actually carry out on a daily basis. This issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* explores both challenges and breakthroughs related to successful implementation of curriculum.

Intended curriculum takes shape when national, state, and local governments adopt standards to outline what content and processes should be emphasized in education. In theory, the standards then guide the textbook and assessment writers. It seems deceptively logical that if the teachers follow the textbooks and teach their students everything therein, students will in turn, record strong performances on the correlated standardized tests. The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2010) legislation

reflected this line of thinking as it moved us toward wider-reaching use of comprehensive reform programs which frequently mandate the use of narrowly-defined, evidence-based, and often scripted curricula. *Race to the Top* (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009) funding use has pushed this line of thinking even further by tying federal monies to student performance on standardized tests by requiring that such scores be used as a measure of teacher performance within the teacher evaluation process. The message seems to be clear: *If* the curriculum is based on state and national standards, and *if* it includes evidence-based instructional practices, then teachers simply have to follow the curriculum and their students will inevitably perform well on standardized tests. Unfortunately, many people, primarily those who are not involved in schools and classrooms on a daily basis, fail to acknowledge the many “ifs” that appear in real schools and classrooms.

Brains: The Textbook Materials

In this issue, the work of Jitendra, Griffin, and Xin (2010) reveals substantial misalignment between a third grade mathematics textbook and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Standards. Perhaps, in this era of standards reform, it is unrealistic to expect the textbook writers and publishers to keep pace with frequent changes in standards and processes; however, even in situations where the textbook publishers are able to keep pace, due to budget constraints, many state textbook adoption cycles span five or six years, leaving lag time between standards updates and the textbooks that are available for use in classrooms. The misalignment of textbook content with standards is also likely linked to the fact that textbook publishers attempt to meet the requirements of multiple states, none of whose standards are identical. This desire to design texts for multiple states with varying needs results in the inclusion of many lessons that are not necessarily applicable to every state.

Ladnier-Hicks, McNeese, and Johnson (2010), whose research is also contained in this issue, undertook their work in response to a district mandated change in reading programs. While ultimately their research focused on student outcomes as related to a their newly adopted “scientifically based” reading program, Scott Foresman’s *Reading Street*, the impetus for the work stemmed from the fact that despite the “scientifically based” moniker, they could not find any independent, non-commissioned research on the program. Not surprisingly, their research found no statistically significant differences in student achievement with the new program. However, it certainly raises questions about the pressures of current program adoption processes especially in light of accountability and ever increasing expectations for student achievement. Curriculum implementation is not as simple as adopting a program and following the script, as some would have us believe.

Courage: The Leadership

The success of curriculum implementation lies in the support of school administrators and the knowledge and practices of teachers. The importance of leadership in terms of school success is rarely questioned; it is key. Despite the fact that the concept of transformative leadership, “. . . which should reflect the basic assumption that improving educational policy and practice is a complex matter, requiring multiple disciplines and many angles of vision” (Callejo, 2009, p. 18), has dominated the leadership literature for the past thirty years (McDowelle, 2009), administrators are often simply seen as the gatekeepers and taskmasters of curriculum implementation. In many traditional models, it is the administrator’s job to facilitate the adoption process, purchase the materials, and distribute them to teachers. However, the transformative leader would not stop there, but would rather continue to provide support and guidance for all those responsible for implementing the curriculum. Hall’s (2010) research in this issue particularly supports this notion; finding effective leadership on multiple levels is a necessary component in building collective capacity. In her case study of a middle school, Hall describes how expectations associated with the external pressures of state mandated high-stakes tests led to the development of a successful internal accountability program, which resulted in higher student achievement.

Heart: The Teachers

In an era of teacher accountability, scripted programs, and standardization, many teachers believe there is a recipe for classroom success: bulleted lists and step by step procedures that when implemented lead to student success. The reality is that teachers are the most important factor in curriculum implementation, and three articles in this issue address the development of this valuable commodity in some regard. Lucey, Hatch, and Giannangelo (2010) emphasize the need for historical knowledge and question the ability of preservice teachers to demonstrate levels of historical understanding necessary for teaching content. Jintendra et al. (2010) call into question teachers’ instructional practices in math, though they do not point fingers at the shortcomings of either preservice or inservice training. Finally, Hall’s (2010) work emphasizes the importance of teacher collaboration to plan and implement an internal accountability system.

The idea that schools need knowledgeable teachers who are able to think on their feet to adapt and develop practice that encompasses appropriate decision-making about instruction based on the needs of students is not new (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Morine-Durshime, 1989). Research that demonstrates the difference between two students who start out at the same level, but then experience two years of effective and ineffective teaching, respectively, speaks to the significance of teacher expertise (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Valencia, Place, Martin, and Grossman (2006) followed four elementary education graduates through their first years of teaching, and conclude, “Many think that curriculum materials can solve the challenges of teaching and learning.

Our [Valencia, et al.] data suggests that the solution is not that simple” (p. 118).
Teachers, not curricula, are the keys to student learning.

Somewhere over the rainbow...

Improvements are emerging throughout the education system. Each of the contributors to this issue offers suggestions for addressing some of these mediating factors, but not without caveats. In regard to textbook materials, Ladnier-Hicks et al. (2010) and Jitendra et al. (2010) provide arguments in favor of critical evaluation of textbooks and associated materials, but acknowledge that time, particularly in relation to program adoption, can be a challenge. The recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by 37 states and territories and the District of Columbia (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010b) seems likely to reduce the differences in expectations among the participating states, and perhaps will remain in effect long enough to allow textbook publishers and assessment writers to synchronize their work in alignment with adopted standards. This is not to say common standards coupled with an aligned curriculum will automatically result in improved achievement for all students. In fact, the CCSS “do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010a, p. 4). Hall’s (2010) research reveals that even in successful schools clear tensions exist between the curriculum pacing guide, designed to ensure that all necessary material is covered in time for “the test,” and the ability to modify instruction to meet the needs of students.

In the area of leadership, Hall (2010) gives us hope in her case study of a school where student achievement is improving; she highlights what is working rather than what is not. While teachers in particular acknowledge there is room for improvement at their school, it is also clear that both these teachers and school leaders hold each other accountable for meeting the expectations of external mandates. School leaders support knowledgeable teachers as they utilize the available resources to meet the needs of the students. Administrators like these recognize the importance of being transformative leaders who provide on-going support and guidance for all those responsible for implementing the curriculum. It is the courage of whole school communities, like the one in Hall’s study, to embrace curricular reforms and work together to enable all children to learn that ultimately results in student achievement.

Clearly, the teachers, the heart of implementation of intended curriculum, need strong preservice education if they are to find success in the classroom. Lucey et al. (2010) join the many other voices who, in recent years, urge teacher educators to look critically at the outcomes of their own programs and modify practices to turn out teachers with more in-depth content knowledge. They, too, acknowledge the constraints of time, even going so far as to point out the economic impact of more coursework at the preservice level. Jitendra et al. (2010) also question the impact of teachers’ instructional practices in implementing educational reforms. Since we know that

“sustained and intensive professional development for teachers is related to student achievement gains” (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 43), it stands to reason that professional development of inservice teachers should move beyond the typical one-day workshops and “day before school” curriculum material orientation (Borko, 2004; Hill, 2009; Richardson, 2003; Speck, 2002; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). It is widely accepted that teachers are the key to student learning (Allington, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1997, 1999; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Ficici & Siegle, 2008; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002; Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006), and meaningful and sustained support must be provided if teachers are to grow in their abilities to effectively modify curriculum to meet the varied needs of their students.

Conclusion

The intended curriculum is inherently different than the implemented curriculum, and depending on the mediating factors (e.g., teacher knowledge, school leadership, curriculum materials), can significantly impact student achievement. In the quest to find their way through the maze of standardized tests, value added scores, adequate yearly progress, and all other accountability measures, schools are often opting to adopt “research based” curricula and then rigorously monitor teachers’ fidelity to these programs. This approach ignores the fact that both students and their needs are diverse; they are not lab rats predictably reacting to external stimuli. Even if we acknowledge that curricula alone can make a positive difference in teaching efficacy, we know that individual students, because of their varied backgrounds will experience the curriculum differently.

The research in this issue demonstrates that the challenges we face are great and the potential answers are not as simple as implementing a curriculum. We must be willing to acknowledge that the most effective means of achieving our educational goals may not be running all the way to the Emerald City. We must also be willing to pull back the curtains and to find ourselves; wizards with supernatural powers are only illusions. There are no magic wands or ruby slippers to fix the challenges we face. Just as our students’ needs are varied and multifaceted, so must our solutions be. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion needed brains, heart, and courage to support Dorothy on her journey. The work contained in this issue demonstrates that educators, too, need these characteristics as they navigate the intricacies of teaching in the 21st century. If we can stay true to our mission to educate all our children, then we believe that successes in academic achievement can indeed be realized.

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