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Commentary

Curriculum Content, Placement, and Alignment: From Textbooks to Education Standards and Assessments

Weldon F. Zenger and
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The dominant role of textbooks in curriculum planning and development as well as in content grade placement and alignment goes without question. It has been common for textbooks to be the basic subject matter content in many school systems. That dominant role is changing. Education standards of one type or another and the assessment of those standards are beginning to dominate content selection, placement and alignment in the curriculum. This is happening at all levels: national, state, and local. It appears that textbooks will play a major part in the implementation of these education standards, however, in a more supportive than dominant role, which will affect the development of course and lesson plans.

Thirty-Year Search

In the early 1970s, these authors began to search for a process to evaluate and select textbooks. Educators and educational associations at all levels as well as textbook publishers throughout the country were contacted. As a result of this study, a book was published entitled, *Evaluation and Selection of Textbooks* (Zenger and Zenger 1976). Through the research and writing of that book, these writers developed respect and appreciation for the extremely difficult task publishers encounter when publishing textbooks including the selection and placement of content in the curriculum. Finding this so difficult but important for school curriculum development, these researchers began the search for how subject matter content is and has been placed at particular grade levels in the past, who decided, when it was decided, and what specific content criteria were used to make that determination.

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This part of the study began in the mid-1980s and is continuing at the present time. However, sometime during the mid-1990s, something new began to appear in the search for how content is placed and aligned in school curricula. That something new was education standards and the assessment of those standards. The origin of this standards movement probably goes back to the national reports of the 1980s such as *A Nation at Risk*; however, the influence and domination of education standards on school curricula is a recent phenomenon.

Textbooks Sometimes Criticized

A word in defense of textbooks and textbook publishers seems in order before moving to the standards movement. These writers, with 70 years of combined teaching experience from elementary through graduate school levels, have found textbooks for the most part appropriate, accurate and professionally written. Textbooks can be lifesavers for beginning teachers or those teachers who have four, five, six, or more subjects and grades for which to prepare. However, for textbooks to include content to meet the needs of everyone as well as many other requirements is almost impossible, i.e., some states have numerous form and format directives publishers must meet before textbooks can even be considered for adoption in those states. Considering all that is involved in publishing textbooks, publishers have done and continue to do a good, if not a great, job with a most difficult task. And as will be noted later, textbooks are not leaving the educational scene.

Textbook publishers seem to agree that education standards, especially state standards, dominate curriculum development. Peter Jovanovich, Chief Executive Officer of Pearson Education, states it very clearly:

"The process is straight-forward and universal. Publishers decide on a sequence of instruction based on the statewide or local curriculum guidelines and assessments. Those scope and sequence documents prepared by state departments of education and the statewide assessments determine what is taught and when. Publishers adhere to these standards rigorously." Peter Jovanovich (personal letter to authors, April 28, 1999).

Also, publishers are responding to this change from textbooks to education standards for placing content in the curriculum by including content in textbooks based on the standards and assessments of as many states and even local school districts as possible. Indeed, a most difficult undertaking. However, by doing this, textbooks, in a more supportive than dominant role, will continue to be the primary instruments for instruction and implementation of these standards.

Education Standards and Assessments Dominate Content—But Textbooks Still the Major Source of Instructional Materials

Education standards and the assessment of those standards is the dominant force driving educational planning and development at all levels: national, state, and local. The assessment (testing) of these standards makes them mandatory for local school districts. However, there is considerable disagreement among educators as to the appropriate use of education standards including their development, placement, and alignment in school curricula. This uncertainty about placement of education standards in the curriculum can be expected, since there is no organized systematic plan or process for the placement (scope and sequencing) of content to school grade levels. The placement of content has been by textbooks, tradition, teachers'

expertise or favorite topics, professional judgment, current practice, craft knowledge-limited research, higher education requirements, etc. (Zenger & Zenger, 1997-98; Zenger & Zenger, 1999). These authors address education standards and curriculum content placement in an article entitled, "Why Teach Certain Material at Specific Grade Levels?" which was published in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, November, 2002. (Zenger & Zenger, 2002)

Implications for Educators: Now and Immediate Future

So what does this mean for educational leaders, curriculum planners, and teachers? Dr. James Kenworthy, middle school principal, Manhattan Kansas, sees it as a complicated process:

"The standards movement only increases the complexity of the training that educators in the future face. Educational institutions will most likely need to restructure their training programs to include a whole course devoted to understanding and using these curricular standards. Local school districts also will need to provide staff development opportunities for the current classroom teachers." Dr. James Kenworthy (personal interview with authors, Manhattan, Kansas, August 3, 2001).

Regardless of the information and specific preparation educators receive about the standards movement, they have no choice but to incorporate education standards and assessments into the course of study. This is necessary to show academic accountability for both themselves and their students. First, they must identify and be certain to include the content of standards which are to be tested. Next, they have to develop or acquire instructional materials specifically including as much of that content as possible. Since textbook publishers are making a special effort to include instructional material for the content of as many education standards as possible, textbooks will probably be the best single source available. This means that textbooks will continue to serve one of the major, if not the major, functions (instruction) for school curriculum planning and development. Curriculum and instruction based on education standards and assessments (high stakes testing) may not be the best way of teaching and educating students; but for the present time, that is the process being used in an attempt to show educational accountability.

Summary

Curriculum content as well as its placement and alignment to grade levels (a function once dominated by textbooks) is changing to education standards and assessments. This is especially true at the state and local levels. Textbooks, though sometimes criticized, have done a good job with a most difficult task and appear to be preparing for a major role in the standards movement. As curriculum planners and teachers incorporate education standards into the course of study, instructional materials including content for those standards will be required. Textbook publishers are attempting to meet this need by developing textbooks based on as many education standards as possible. This will make textbooks the major source for curriculum materials in the education standards movement, the same as they have been in the past. Although they no longer dominate content and its placement in the curriculum, textbooks, in all probability, will remain the dominant source for instructional materials and will be a major force in the implementation of these recent education standards. Educational leaders and curriculum planners will, of course, want to analyze the education standards in textbooks being considered for

adoption and determine whether or not those standards meet the needs of their curricula.

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