



CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: If used with good judgment and professionalism, curriculum alignment that aligns the written, the taught, and the tested curriculums can be an effective means of helping classroom teachers develop units that will interest students and enable them to perform well on high-stakes tests. An expanded approach to curriculum alignment also can bring into congruence other types of curriculums: the hidden, the recommended, the excluded, the supported, and the learned.

Curriculum alignment is one of those issues about which individual scholars and practitioners express seemingly irreconcilable differences.¹ Whereas many come out strongly in favor of curriculum alignment, others present forceful views in opposition. William Wraga's article in this issue excellently represents this dissenting perspective and delineates the several flaws in curriculum alignment as it presently is practiced. This article intends to explain how educators can use alignment constructively and expand it beyond its present narrowness.

At the outset, an understanding of teachers' perceptions of curriculum alignment as they know it and use it is helpful. To see through teachers' eyes, for example, assume that you are a 6th grade teacher in one of the 40 or more states with "strong" accountability programs. The state department of education has issued curriculum guides for every subject—guides based on state-developed content standards and their related benchmarks. This state agency has also decreed that examinations will be administered to all 6th graders. Moreover, students' results on those examinations will be used for several purposes: to evaluate your teaching; to judge your school; to reward or punish you and the school; and to determine if students will be retained or promoted. To assist you, state department staff have published "testlets," practice tests that you can use to develop

¹See William G. Wraga, "The Educational and Political Implications of Curriculum Alignment and Standards-Based Reform," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 15 (Fall 1999): 4-25.

test-wiseness in your students and to prepare them for these high-stakes tests.

The prudent response that most teachers make in such situations is a common sense one. They check the content of the state tests by using nonconfidential materials, examine the curriculum guide to remind themselves about what else should be taught, develop plans to accommodate the guide and the test, and teach as best as they can. This process, in essence, is curriculum alignment as most teachers know and understand it.

One step toward the reconciliation of advocacy and dissent about curriculum alignment is the realization that the process is only a tool, one that can be used foolishly or wisely. Used foolishly, curriculum alignment diminishes the art of teaching, sterilizes the curriculum, and makes the classroom a boring place.² Used wisely, it offers teachers a practical method by which they may ensure that their students are well prepared for the mandated test. This wise and practical use of alignment was advocated by several experienced teachers. In writing personal essays on how they respond to standards, accountability, and high-stake tests, most replied, "We cope creatively."³

In a time of mandated standards and high-stakes tests, ignoring the need for alignment is foolish at best. The issue is not "Should we align?" Rather, it is "How can we align so that alignment is teacher-directed and teacher-friendly?"

CREATIVE COPING

Curriculum alignment can be used wisely and constructively in several ways. The process explained below is one that teachers in workshops have found useful, but the process has not been rigorously evaluated.

Analysis of the Written Curriculum

The first step is to analyze the school district's written curriculum in terms of three types of outcomes—mastery, organic, and enrichment. The mastery curriculum has several features that distinguish it from the other two types of outcomes. The mastery curriculum is essential for all students; it is best learned when carefully organized and structured; it is based on state standards and benchmarks;

²Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of Control* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

³Allan A. Glatthorn and Jean Fontana, *Coping with Standards, Tests, and Accountability: Voices from the Classroom* (in press).

it should be emphasized in one specific grade; and it likely is tested. Here is an example of a mastery benchmark from a compilation of content standards by Kendall and Marzano (although they do not use the term *mastery benchmark*): "Understands the similarities and differences in colonial concepts of community (e.g., Puritan's covenant community, Chesapeake colonial emphasis on individualism)."⁴

The organic curriculum also is essential for all students. However, rather than being assigned to one grade level, it is emphasized at every appropriate occasion. (Some districts have preferred to use the term *objectives for continuing development*.) The organic curriculum usually is not tested. Here is a benchmark from the Kendall and Marzano compilation that may be classified as organic: "Knows how to perceive past events with historical empathy."⁵

The enrichment curriculum is not essential for all students; it is simply "nice to know." Obviously such a classification is a matter of judgment. This benchmark from the same compilation would be classified as enrichment, although others might classify it differently: "Understands the differences among several state constitutions."⁶

In general, the mastery curriculum should require only from 60 to 80 percent of class time to teach, leaving the remainder of the time for the organic and enrichment curriculums—and any remediation that becomes necessary. Obviously, this reasonable allocation should vary with the subject, the grade level, and the nature of the students.

This classification system has several practical advantages. It gives the classroom teacher some room for "slippage." It helps curriculum developers make a critical distinction between mastery benchmarks, which should be emphasized at a given grade level, and organic benchmarks, which should be emphasized whenever appropriate. Finally, it enables teams of teachers to design enrichment units for all students, not just for the gifted, who perhaps need enrichment least of all.

Development of Mastery Units

With the foregoing analysis conducted, teachers then can align the written, tested, and taught curriculums. They review their identification of the mastery benchmarks by checking the curriculum guide, the nonconfidential information about the test, and their textbooks. By clustering related mastery benchmarks and using their own creativity, they develop units that they know will interest their students. For example, the mastery benchmark noted above can pro-

⁴John S. Kendall and Robert J. Marzano, *Content Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997), p. 139.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 145.

vide the foundation for a unit entitled "Whose Community?" which can begin with students' present understanding of their community, briefly examine current concepts of an ideal community, and then emphasize the similarities and differences between some of the colonial communities. In this sense, teachers will have developed their own written curriculum, all within the limits of prescribed state standards and state tests.

Teachers then can implement the unit flexibly, modifying it to respond to the needs and abilities of their students. In this manner, they align the tested curriculum with their written curriculum and their written with their taught. As they implement the unit, they try to build students' empathy for the early settlers, thus nurturing the organic curriculum. If time is available, they can teach a brief enrichment unit on Utopian societies.

In summary, this process of aligning the written, tested, and taught curriculums can achieve seemingly contradictory goals: to enable students to do well on high-stakes tests and to provide students with in-depth units of study that are likely to engage their interests.

EXPANSION OF THE CONCEPT OF ALIGNMENT

In addition to its susceptibility to abuse, the prevalent model of curriculum alignment can be faulted for its narrowness. Rather than focusing solely on the written, the tested, and the taught, alignment should be expanded so that it goes well beyond this restrictive focus. To achieve this goal, I have found useful a concept of eight types of curriculums.

Eight Types of Curriculums

The *hidden curriculum* (a term coined by Jackson⁷) is the unintended curriculum—what students learn from the school's culture and climate and related policies and practices. It includes such elements as use of time, allocation of space, funding for programs and activities, and disciplinary policies and practices. One example of the hidden curriculum follows: An elementary school allocates each week 450 minutes to reading and 45 minutes to art. The unintended message of this plan to students is "Art doesn't matter."

The *excluded curriculum* is what has been left out of the curriculum, either intentionally or unintentionally. Eisner calls this type the "null curriculum" because it has no effect.⁸ Several issues typically omitted from the U.S. history curriculum include the labor movement

⁷Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968).

⁸Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: Macmillan).

in the United States, the importance of religion in American life, and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Gehrke, Knapp, and Sirotnik point out that the excluded curriculum is "powerful by virtue of its absence."⁹

The *recommended curriculum* is the curriculum advocated by experts in the subject fields. Almost every discipline-based professional group has promulgated curriculum standards for its field. An excellent compilation of these standards appears in the Kendall and Marzano book referenced earlier.

The *written curriculum* is the document(s) produced by the state education agency, the school system, the school, and/or the classroom teacher. It specifies what is to be taught. Most states issue their own standards; some identify benchmarks as well. District-level documents usually include a curriculum guide and a scope and sequence chart. The written curriculum, to be sure, also includes materials developed by classroom teachers. The written curriculum is the one usually meant by educators who say, "We're going to develop a mathematics curriculum."

The *supported curriculum* is the curriculum that appears in textbooks, software, and multimedia materials. Some state authorities designate which textbooks are approved for school use; in other states, school district committees make these choices.

The *tested curriculum* is the curriculum that is embodied in state tests, school system tests, and teacher-made tests. The term *test* is used broadly here to include standardized tests, competency tests, and performance assessments.

The *taught curriculum* is the curriculum that teachers actually deliver; it is the curriculum that is enacted or put into operation. Researchers have pointed out the enormous variation in the nature of what is actually taught, despite the superficial appearance of uniformity.¹⁰

The *learned curriculum* is the "bottom-line" curriculum—what students learn. Clearly, it is the most important curriculum of all.

Interactions of the Curriculums

How do these several curriculums interact? Based on my personal experience and research, I propose several answers.

The hidden curriculum has a powerful influence on students. Every day, students are exposed to its elements and internalize the

⁹Nathalie J. Gehrke, Michael S. Knapp, and Kenneth A. Sirotnik, "In Search of the School Curriculum," in *Review of Research in Education* 18, ed. Gerald Grant (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1992), p. 53.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

messages sent. Thus, if the school system leaders speak about the importance of physical education in elementary school but allocate to it only 45 minutes each week, the message of that aspect of the hidden curriculum is that physical education does not matter.

The recommended curriculum in general has little impact on the written curriculum and perhaps less on classroom teachers. A notable exception was the recommendations advanced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.¹¹ They seem to have influenced the written mathematics curriculums of many school systems and have been received positively by most mathematics teachers.

The written curriculum has only a moderate influence on the taught curriculum. Most experienced teachers review the guide at the beginning of the year and then put it aside as they weigh other factors in deciding what to teach. They tend to give greater attention to factors such as student interests, their assessment of what has worked in the past, and their inferences about what types of items will be on the state and district tests.

At present the tested curriculum seems to be having the strongest influence on teachers and students. In an era of accountability, teachers understandably are concerned about how their students perform on the test. Much classroom time is spent on developing test-wisness and practicing on testlike items. In almost every class, students ask the perennial question: "Will this be on the test?" A positive side to this emphasis on tests exists, especially when it takes the form of classroom assessment. Black and Wiliam conclude from their experience and the accumulated research that formative classroom assessment is the best way to raise standards.¹² Note, however, that a major research study concluded that high-stakes testing rewards harmful instructional practices and has no effect on school improvement.¹³

The supported curriculum continues to exert a strong influence on the taught curriculum, especially for elementary teachers who teach four or five subjects. The textbook, consequently, becomes their major source of content knowledge.

A significant gap exists between the taught and the learned. Students do not always learn what they are taught. Several factors account for the gap: teachers' failure to make the curriculum meaningful and challenging; teachers' failure to monitor student learning;

¹¹National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for the Teaching of School Mathematics* (Reston, VA: Author, 1989).

¹²Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Inside the Black Box," *Phi Delta Kappan* 80 (October 1998): 139-148.

¹³Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, "Does High-Stakes Testing Improve School Effectiveness?" *ERS Spectrum* 10 (Spring 1992): 3-12.

students' low level of motivation; students' cognitive abilities; and students' short attention span.

Aligning the Most Important Types of Curriculums

If, as noted above, eight types of curriculums exist, each of which may be aligned with each other, then at least 36 alignment possibilities exist. Of this number, however, only a limited number seem to be worth the effort to align. Based on my experience and knowledge of the research, I propose that the following are ones that best might be added to the written/taught/tested triad.

Hidden/taught. In this alignment, the faculty would work together to uncover their hidden curriculum. They would then identify those elements of the hidden curriculum that are conveying lessons that are discrepant with the intent of the taught curriculum. Subsequently they would modify the hidden curriculum to ensure that it conveys the messages intended. Suppose, for example, that the teachers strongly support a multicultural curriculum. However, their analysis of the hidden curriculum might reveal that currently only the interests of the majority culture are advanced. Then, the teachers would change the hidden curriculum so that it reflected a multicultural orientation.

Written/recommended. In this process, developers would compare the state standards and benchmarks for a given subject with those recommended by the professional organizations. The intent here is the improvement of the state standards through the addition of the best standards suggested by professional groups. The need to improve the state standards is borne out by Saxe's evaluation: of 38 state social studies standards examined, only 13 received a grade of C or better.¹⁴ Nineteen were rated "useless."

Excluded/written. The purpose of this alignment is to recapture content from the excluded curriculum that should be added to the written curriculum. Consider this example from the English language arts curriculum. Very few of the English curriculum guides I have evaluated make any mention of dialect studies. In this diverse society, such content would seem to be essential. The written curriculum should include such knowledge as the following: the nature of dialect, the extent of dialects ("we all speak a dialect"), changes in dialect, dialect as a barrier to increased social status, dialect as a bonding mechanism, the influence of television on dialects, and the types of dialect.

¹⁴David W. Saxe, *State History Standards* (New York: Fordham Foundation, 1998), p. 10.

Supported/written. In an informal study I conducted a few years ago, I compared one of the textbooks on a state-approved list with the state-mandated course of study. Only 25 percent of the content of the state curriculum guide appeared in the state-adopted textbook. In one sense, school districts that adopted this book were wasting 75 percent of their textbook budget. Such an alignment is relatively simple, although practitioners should not rely on the publisher's own analysis.

Tested/learned. This alignment is a reminder for teachers to use the results of both the state's mandated tests and the teacher's tests to diagnose teaching/learning problems. In too many instances, test results are simply recorded and then forgotten until grading time arrives.

Aligning the Taught/Learned Curriculums

The discrepancy between the taught and the learned curriculums is so significant that it deserves special analysis.

What is the taught/learned gap? The *taught/learned gap* is the difference between what the teacher teaches, as seen by a trained observer, and what the students learn, as determined by a valid assessment.

How much of a gap exists? Although no conclusive evidence exists with respect to a quantitative difference, the available research indicates that the gap is considerable. Based on my observations of classrooms and analysis of 40 taped segments, my informed guess is that the typical student in a given class period learns 50 percent of what the teacher teaches. Viewing one particular ASCD videotape, I estimated that the students learned about 10 percent of what the teacher was teaching.

What causes the gap? Several causative factors are at work here. Consider first the environmental factors, starting with classroom climate. If the climate is conflict-ridden, students will be inclined to deal with the conflict, thus taking their minds off what the teacher is teaching. If the climate is too "hot," in the sense of extreme closeness of teacher and students, then too much time will be spent on interpersonal issues. A second factor is external noise. Although internal noise does not seem to be a factor, external noise (e.g., trains, construction, trucks, fire engines, airplanes) seems to distract students from learning tasks.

Several teacher factors also contribute. Teacher behaviors that would result in a large gap include poor organization of lessons; unclear explanations of concepts with insufficient examples; speech without sufficient volume or clarity; provision of misinformation to

students; insufficient monitoring and assessment; interruption of explanations with disciplinary concepts and actions; no provision of corrective feedback to students; possession of insufficient content knowledge; and choice of lesson content that is not developmentally appropriate.

To be sure, several student factors are easily noted. These include inattentiveness; lack of prior knowledge or incorrect prior knowledge; learning, auditory, or visual disability; emotional problems; absorption with a personal agenda; influence of peers who disparage school learning; disconnectedness with lesson content; fatigue or illness; interference because of cultural differences; and a preference for avoiding failure rather than being embarrassed by participating.

What can be done to narrow the gap? In my work with teachers, I have found that teachers are receptive to the use of peer collaboration in diagnosing and remediating the problem. They begin by discussing their experience as it relates to the particular issue. For example, Teacher A volunteers to have a videotape made of his or her teaching. After viewing the tape alone, Teacher A can scrap the tape if it is felt that the tape is not representative, or Teacher A and the peer associate—Teacher B—can view the tape together, with Teacher A leading the analysis and discussion. Then Teacher B takes a turn in the same manner. In all of this viewing and analyzing, teachers focus on student learning.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

Curriculum alignment is a tool that can be used to damage or to strengthen the curriculum. The processes explained above can contribute to the construction of a learning-centered curriculum.

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