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Elizabeth Dutro
Cleveland State University

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Do State Content Standards Make a Difference?

An Illustration of the Difficulties of Addressing that Pressing Question

Elizabeth Dutro
Cleveland State University

Abstract

This article discusses the complexities surrounding the relationship between state content standards and student achievement. Drawing on interviews and document analysis, this paper describes one case of how the embedded contexts of state, district, and an individual teacher's experiences interacted around state content standards in literacy. Student test scores improved, but what led to that improvement is not easily determined. This case reveals that what appears to be an ideal outcome of adopting standards in curriculum planning is really much more complicated, involving district initiatives, curriculum adoption, shifting district demographics, and the individual expertise of teachers.

Soon after her state officially approved its current content standards in literacy in 1998, Donna, a first grade teacher, found a copy of the standards in her school mailbox. She and her colleagues were required to post the literacy standards in their classrooms and were urged to use them in their planning. When I asked Donna what impact she felt the standards had on her students' experiences in literacy, she talked about their usefulness in planning, how the standards have provided focus and organization to her school's literacy curriculum. She also began to describe other steps that her school and district had taken over the past three years to address slipping standardized test scores in reading: a before and after school book club for struggling readers, a new curriculum, teachers moving into new positions as "reading coaches" to support colleagues' literacy teaching, and a new arts magnet program at her school. Reading scores in Donna's district have risen; but, due to what factors? When the state looks at the increased reading scores in Donna's district over the past few years, do they see a standards success story?

What impact are state content standards having on student learning? This is a difficult question on many fronts. First, state content standards are relatively new and research has, thus far, focused more on evaluating the standards themselves and how teachers and districts interpret and implement them, than in their impact on student learning. Second, tracing the role that content standards play in teacher practice or improved student performance on standardized test scores is extremely difficult. Districts, schools, and teachers are involved in many overlapping efforts to improve practice, and student learning and content standards may play a more or less prominent role in that process. Third, it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about content standards apart from standardized assessment. As my colleagues and I discovered in a recent interview study with teachers, talk about standards inevitably becomes talk about standardized assessments and issues of accountability (Dutro, Collins, and Collins, 2002).

Yet, as Valencia and Wixson state in their review of research on literacy standards and assessment, "the pressure is mounting on educators to show results in terms of achievement. Future researchers will need to address the challenge, finding meaningful ways to document student achievement while at the same time understanding the process of change and the contexts of schools" (2000, p. 39, 40). Given the time and enormous financial resources that continue to be expended on the development and implementation of content standards, reports on student achievement will indeed be watched with anticipation. However, as research on current and previous reform movements has shown, state, district, and teacher-level issues interact in unique ways that make it difficult to ascribe change to any one element (e.g., Cohen and Ball, 1990; Goertz, Floden, and O'Day, 1995; Spillane and Jennings, 1997).

This article describes one case of how the embedded contexts of state, district, and an individual teacher's experience interacted around state content standards in literacy. Student test scores improved, but what led to that improvement is not easily determined. These stories reveal that what appears to be an ideal outcome of adopting standards in curriculum planning is really much more complicated. This case is not meant to address every relevant aspect of reform activity in the state and district contexts. Rather, I present the interrelated events and decisions that impacted this district and, seemingly, one school's improved scores on a state test, to illustrate the factors at play in many schools' attempts to boost student achievement in the context of standards-based reform. Also, although I speak of the content standards movement generally, my primary focus is on literacy standards and curriculum. I will argue that examining the content and interpretation of state content standards is important, but existing research and the exploration of the case I present here point to the difficulties of determining whether any one piece of the systemic reform puzzle is working to improve learning and opportunities for students or their teachers.

The Content Standards Movement: Recent Past and Present

For almost a decade content standards in key subject areas in the K-12 curriculum have been the focus of much attention by educators, policy makers, and politicians. Starting with the Goals 2000 federal legislation in 1993, national professional organizations and individual states have been engaged in constructing documents that outline what students should know and be able to do in each subject. These content standards are meant to be the roots of systemic reform. According to this model, once a set of content goals was agreed upon, instruction and assessment would grow to support and assess the learning of those goals. By the late 1990s, 49 of 50 states had completed or were in the process of completing state content standards in literacy and assessments that aligned with those standards.

What Makes for Exemplary Standards?

As might be expected, finding consensus on what constituted crucial and appropriate content was difficult. Further, it was not just broad content that these documents fixed to paper, but ideas about when particular content should be introduced and in what detail (Wixson and Dutro, 1999). Soon after many states had completed their content standards, various groups and organizations began to “grade” the state standards. As Valencia and Wixson have recently discussed, this grading was inconsistent and was heavily influenced by the perspectives and ideologies of the groups doing the measuring (2002).

However flawed these reports have been, though, many states have undertaken major revisions of their content standards in response. Further, some of the documents being heralded as exemplary models of literacy content standards have been just those documents that have been criticized by literacy educators and scholars as being too detailed and prescriptive. For instance, the California state literacy standards have been critiqued for being highly specific and leaving little room for district flexibility (Wixson and Dutro, 1999; Valencia and Wixson, 2001); yet, that document is used as one of three model documents by ACHIEVE, an organization that consults with states in the writing and revising of content standards. Although much of the recent controversy around current reforms in education involves the uses and abuses of standardized assessment, content standards, too, continue to be the focus of much debate and concern. By the very virtue of fixing a particular set and sequence of subject matter content to the page, they hold enormous weight. They become the tangible definitions of what counts as acceptable and appropriate foci of curriculum and instruction. Far from being neutral documents, the standards often reflect the controversies and ideological clashes occurring around subject matter in particular states.

The Dynamic Relationship Between Macro and Micro-level Reforms

Of course, content standards are only one element of systemic reform. The impact of macro-level policies, such as state content standards, is dependent on numerous micro-level issues such as district decision-making, teacher beliefs, and social dynamics among school staff (e.g., Spillane and Jennings, 1997; McGill-Franzen and Ward, 1997; Spillane, 1996; Standerford, 1997). For instance, McGill-Franzen and Ward analyzed the understandings of 21 teachers from 4 New York districts who were each involved in district-level professional development efforts around literacy and social studies content standards and assessment. Even in the context of these shared district-level professional development experiences, teachers in each district had widely disparate understandings of content standards in literacy and varied expectations for how the standards might impact their classroom practice. These differences seemed related to how much accountability pressure felt by teachers and how much authority they felt they had over instructional decisions. This and other studies confirm the importance of examining the dynamics that interact in particular contexts to shape understandings and results of reform efforts, including reforms involving state content standards.

In the case of California, the focus here, the nature of the content standards in literacy are closely related to curriculum adoptions, politics around subject matter (particularly reading), and district and school accountability. I chose to showcase California here for two reasons: one, it is one of the states that colleagues and I are focusing on in two separate, ongoing studies related to literacy standards, so I am familiar with the state context (Dutro and Valencia, 2002; Dutro, Collins, and Collins, 2002); two, California’s content standards have received much national attention (both positive and negative) and many of the politics surrounding systemic reform have been played out provocatively in the state.

Below, I describe state and district contexts related to content standards in literacy and other curriculum-related areas that impact the experience of Donna, an elementary teacher who has particular expertise and interest in literacy. A crucial aspect of these stories is that Donna’s school went from being labeled a school at risk three years ago to being honored by the state in 2002 for its improved test scores. Following the case descriptions, I discuss several of the factors, including and related to literacy content standards, which may have impacted this school’s increased scores on the state test. I also point to theories of discourse and positioning as fruitful means through which researchers can continue to unpack the many issues surrounding content standards and their impact on the lives of teachers and students.

The California Context

California developed its current literacy content standards in 1998. Reading, writing, and speaking and listening stan-

dards and benchmarks are included for each grade level, K-12. As researchers have pointed out, California's literacy standards are highly detailed, leaving little room for interpretation or adaptation at the local level (Wixson and Dutro, 1999; Valencia and Wixson, 2002). The state is currently piloting a new standardized assessment based on the state standards. The new test includes items drawn from the SAT-9 (the assessment that has been in use for several years) that have been determined to align with state standards, as well as some items created to address particular state standards. All California students in grades 2-11 are given the state test each year. As reported in *Education Week*, students in California spend more hours on average taking state tests (7.25 hours in fourth grade) than students in any other state (national average of 6.02 at 4th grade) (2001, p. 26). California publishes report cards for districts and rates districts based on test performance. In many districts, school test scores are published in local newspapers and/or on the internet.

The state has recently adopted two commercial literacy programs for use in the state. Districts have a choice between Open Court and Houghton Mifflin. Even prior to the adoption, many districts across the state have mandated Open Court for literacy instruction. This is significant because Open Court is best known for its systematic phonics instruction in the early grades. Perhaps more than any other state, California's political climate surrounding literacy, particularly reading, has been phonics-driven. Conservative foundations, most notably the Packard Foundation, have provided increased funding to select districts if they adopt Open Court. Additionally, the state passed legislation requiring that all literacy-related professional development paid for with state funds had to include specified topics or approaches to reading instruction, with an emphasis on word-level skills (AB-1086). Further, Proposition 209, passed in 1996, which outlawed bilingual education, increased concerns of many educators for how the states' many ESL learners were faring under state policy. These moves have created strife and controversy around reading instruction in the state.

The District Context

Mooretown Unified Schools is a small district in California. It has two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. The students in the district are predominantly white and many are poor, with close to 70 percent qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Mooretown is surrounded by several other small to mid-sized public school districts. Because there is school choice in the larger metropolitan area, competition among districts can be fierce. Mooretown district publishes the scores of each of its schools on the internet and parents often use these scores when considering where to purchase a home.

One of the elementary schools in Mooretown, Franklin Elementary, is at a disadvantage in this competition because of the higher levels of poverty in its surrounding neighborhoods. The superintendent has been strategic in devising ways to draw parents to his district and, in particular, to

Franklin. For instance, the district developed a magnet program in the arts and housed it at Franklin. This has both increased the overall numbers of students at Franklin and drawn more middle-class families to the school.

About four years ago, when the current state content standards were first developed, the district increased its focus on state content standards, particularly in literacy and mathematics. The superintendent wanted state content standards posted in each classroom and asked teachers to use the content standards in their planning. The district ensures that each teacher is provided with a full set of content standards and expects that principals will monitor their active use by teachers.

Donna's Story

Donna works at Franklin elementary school in Mooretown. She has taught for 31 years, 15 of those in her current school. She has taught all elementary grades over the course of her career and currently teaches in the primary grades. Her school has historically not posted high scores on the state mandated assessment and four years ago was designated a "school at risk." Donna remembers the increased emphasis on content standards that began at about that same time. As she described, "when we have our grade-level planning meetings, the standards are right there."

Also four years ago Donna's district was awarded a 3 year grant by a private foundation to fund the implementation of the Open Court program in literacy. A significant amount of money was provided to be used for materials, professional development, and funding for two "reading coaches" who would attend state-level training in the Open Court program and support all teachers in their district in implementing the program. Donna, who was well-respected by both administrators and fellow teachers, was asked to be one of the reading coaches and, after much soul-searching, she agreed and left the classroom for three years.

Donna describes her experience as a reading coach as the most significant professional development experience of her career. Usually fearful of public speaking, she learned to be comfortable providing inservice training to teachers from her own district as well as others in the state. She says that she has a much fuller understanding of the issues of teaching and learning in early reading. Although she began her position feeling somewhat ambivalent about Open Court, she was soon a strong supporter. She emphasizes that it is a great program if teachers implement it in its entirety. She worries that some will neglect the literature and writing process aspects of the program because, as she explains, "those are not the aspects that receive the most attention." The move to adopt Open Court was controversial in her district, and she and the other reading coach caught the brunt of their colleagues' criticisms. Donna describes the stress of having to deal with negative reactions from her fellow teachers. Her awareness of the controversies surrounding this particular reading program grew during her three years of leading her school in its implementation.

At the same time that the district adopted the new literacy program, Donna's school also implemented other supports for reading, including a before school reading "club" and after school tutoring program for students with low scores on district and state reading assessments. In addition, the district revised its report cards to "align" with state standards in math and literacy. This year Donna's school was recognized by the state as one of eight schools with the highest gains on the state assessment. Donna is now happily back in the classroom.

Discussion

As Table 1 illustrates, the standardized test scores in reading have risen dramatically in Mooretown over the past few years. In discussing the relationship among factors that may have led to increased success on standardized test scores at Donna's school, I will focus on state content standards in literacy, curriculum, student demographics and accountability. Because these factors are so interrelated, I do not discuss them separately.

Table 1
SAT-9 reading scores in Mooretown (percent of students performing at or above the 50th percentile)

Grade	1998	1999	2000	2001
2	53	59	78	74
3	55	52	71	73
4	37	58	55	73
5	45	49	61	62

At the urging of the superintendent, the state content standards in literacy were used proactively by the teachers in this district. Donna described the standards as being very helpful as she and her teacher colleagues engaged in long and short term grade-level planning. Donna and other teachers from California tend to see the content standards as more central to their day-to-day teaching life than teachers from other states. As my co-authors and I have conjectured elsewhere, this could be a function of accountability at both the state and local level (Dutro, Collins and Collins, 2002). For the most part, teachers in California also tended to be more anxious and concerned about their own accountability for their students' test scores. In states where teachers talk less anxiously about accountability and standards, the standards appear to be used less proactively in planning and instruction. Although Donna does speak positively about the role that content standards play in planning, she also expresses concern in conversations about the responsibility that teachers bear for student achievement in her district. It is impossible to know the extent to which Donna and her fellow teachers attend to the standards out of a sense of "we'd better or else. . ." but certainly the content standards have played a proactive role in their planning for instruction over the past few years.

In talking about the California literacy standards, Donna also emphasizes that the Open Court curriculum is "aligned"

with the content standards. California clearly agrees, as it has recently adopted Open Court as one of two reading options from which districts may choose. This also means that for teachers who believe or are told that a particular curriculum is aligned with state content standards, teaching that curriculum *is* teaching to the state content standards. Therefore, Donna's talk about the role that the state literacy content standards played in her teaching was often talk about the Open Court curriculum. So, although the teachers at Franklin use the state standards document explicitly in their long-term planning, the use of the required curriculum appears to stand in for the state standards for the bulk of instructional decision-making and daily practice.

The new curriculum was not the only change experienced by Franklin students over the past few years. Because of concern for students struggling with reading and the districts' overall push to raise test scores in response to Franklin's designation as a school at risk, the teachers organized additional instruction for struggling readers both before and after school. These sessions involved primarily small group and individual instruction in both decoding and comprehension and were open to students in all grade levels. The state's emphasis on school accountability and its designation of certain schools as "at risk" arguably motivated Franklin staff to take proactive steps to work even more closely with struggling students. On the other hand, the pressures of high-stakes accountability exact a cost in teacher stress, retention and increased instructional time devoted to test preparation (Dutro, Collins and Collins, 2002; Kohn, 2000). Donna argues that the move to implement extra instruction for struggling readers was as much a result of ongoing concern for students and the schools' increased awareness of literacy learning (as a result of the curriculum adoption and her work as reading coach), as accountability issues.

Like many larger districts, Mooretown has made attempts to balance the demographics across district schools. In this small district, it is only the elementary schools where this is an issue. Soon after Franklin was designated a school at risk, the superintendent decided to house a magnet program for the arts in that school. The program began with one kindergarten classroom, adding a first and second grade in the past two years. The plan is to continue the program until a K-5 program is available. Families apply to have their children assigned to the magnet classrooms and, indeed, many of the middle and upper-middle class families moving into the area have applied to the program. Because older siblings also enroll in the school, this move has shifted the demographics in the entire school. Although the shift is relatively modest, it is one more factor in Franklin's evolution over the past few years.

Conclusion

This case is an example of the many factors at play in the current reform context. So, what of content standards? I believe that examining state content standards documents

and their use is important. These documents do work to concretize particular ideas about literacy learning, ideas that will be used as the basis for instruction and for the evaluation of teachers' approaches. The documents provide insight into the kinds of learning experiences that will be encouraged and valued in a state. Perhaps most importantly, the standards should eventually reflect the content that is measured by state assessments. If instruction is indeed aligned to content standards and standards are aligned to the assessment, then increased student achievement should, in theory, follow.

However, it is clear that the documents in themselves reveal only one small piece of the story. States emphasize the importance of their content standards and districts may echo this concern in their messages to teachers. Yet, it is often the adopted curriculum that drives instruction. Further, most certainly factors such as accountability, politics, supplementary instruction for struggling students, and demographics at the local level also influence student achievement. Even further, as it stands "student achievement" is almost entirely determined by performance on state assessments. This ever-increasing emphasis on testing and its role in student retention and high school graduation continues to be criticized by many educators.

It is impossible to discuss the current reform context without using terms that are contested and open to interpretation. These include "achievement," "standards," "accountability," and "assessment." All of the factors influencing change in Mooretown are dependent on how the language of reform is interpreted and acted upon. An important move in research on standards and related reforms is to draw on frameworks that facilitate a close look at the multiple and overlapping discourses of policy at all levels of implementation and how those discourses position teachers and children, the people who are most directly affected by these policies (e.g., Foucault, 1977; Davies and Harre, 1990). Research that examines the language of policy in this way is increasing (Hill, 2001; Luke, 1998). We may never be able to directly answer the question "What impact are state content standards having on student learning?," but we can continue to closely examine the ideas and actions within standards-based reforms that impact children's experiences and opportunities in schools.

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