“Lost at Sea”: New Teachers’ Experiences with Curriculum and Assessment

David Kauffman, Susan Moore Johnson, Susan M. Kardos, Edward Liu, & Heather G. Peske

Novice teachers are called upon daily to make decisions that greatly affect the lives of their students, including the task of what curricula to teach and in what manner it should be taught. As the pressures of standardized tests increase, and public scrutiny as to what teachers teach becomes a reality, the role of a defined, concise, and useful curriculum for novice teachers to use becomes apparent.

This article presents the results of fifty interviews with 1st and 2nd year teachers in various Massachusetts schools during the 1999-2000 school year. Data was collected through transcribed interview sessions and survey results regarding novice teachers’ responses to questions on career, incentives and rewards, professional culture, and curriculum and assessment. This study focuses on the novice teachers’ interactions with the curriculum, and is not intended to be an evaluation of the curriculum materials themselves.

Researchers cited one principle theme, stating “…most new teachers…received little or no guidance about what to teach or how to teach it…Rather than lamenting a lack of freedom or expressing a need to assert their autonomy, they longed for greater specification of their curriculum” (278). This theme is elaborated upon in three sections, noting the curriculum void novice teachers face, the impact of assessment standards on new teachers’ curriculum experiences, and the retention and support of new teachers as they develop curriculum materials.

Novice teachers cited either a total lack of curriculum materials and teaching techniques from which to draw or simply a list of curriculum topics and skills without information on or guidance regarding how to implement the material. In addition to the multitude of tasks novice teachers must master, respondents reported spending “inordinate amounts of time and money developing their own content and materials from scratch” (282) as they struggled to fill the curriculum void. The dilemma of purely scripted teacher materials as a conflict to teacher autonomy is addressed; those interviewed preferred having accessibility to scripted materials as a known resource from which to pull instructional ideas and content, thus preserving their rights “to adapt the prepared curriculum and materials to their own unique (teaching) styles” (286).

Respondents also cited various difficulties surrounding accountability and curriculum. First, novice teachers battle with vague curriculum frameworks set forth by the state; while the frameworks convey standards, they do not fill the void of an actual curriculum. Additionally, those teachers who are provided a concrete curriculum often discover misalignment between the curriculum and the state standards. Finally, novice teachers report that there is simply too much material to cover, and the pressures of high stakes testing add to “do(ing) the impossible” (290).

The retention of teachers under the conditions of having “to choose content, devise strategies, and prepare materials, but … do so knowing that (their) failure to get it right could compromise the school’s (MCAS) ranking and lead to public embarrassment” appears to be an arduous task. The implications of teacher uncertainty regarding curriculum, coupled with the national teacher attrition average of 20%, suggests an “urgent need to carefully orient new teachers to the curriculum” (292). Although the idea of prepackaged teaching materials is often argued against by proponents of teacher autonomy, in the immediate context of novice teacher retention, “some teachers may interpret (the curriculum) as helpful and appreciate it as a resource” (293).

In closing, the authors suggest action in the areas of state policy, curriculum research and development, and collaboration around curriculum at the school site. First, the findings of this study suggest that state legislators must provide additional attention and energy towards providing “new teachers with a basic set of instructional structures, strategies, and materials.” Additionally, further research is needed to better evaluate existing materials, and to develop new materials for the subject areas. Finally, the authors note that novice teachers desire more time to collaborate with veteran teachers regarding curriculum and instructional strategies, adding that veteran teachers often benefit as well from the time spent refining their curriculum and strategies.

Results of this study were published in Teacher College Record, 104, 273-300.

Abstracted by Benjamin Dotger